

LITTLE

DAVID

by

R. S. CHRISTIE



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LITTLE DAVID

By the Same Author

THE HOUSE OF THE BEAUTIFUL HOPE

LITTLE DAVID

BY
ROBERT STUART CHRISTIE



NEW YORK
THOMAS SELTZER
1923

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TO ALL
IN SEARCH OF HAPPINESS

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LITTLE DAVID

LITTLE DAVID

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID APPEARS

THIS story starts where the other one ends: but that does not matter. It is always so in life, and as this is all about what actually did happen—you will readily believe me, for it is so strange, and foolish, and not at all like a decent novel or a proper work of fiction—I feel perfectly entitled to commence abruptly and at once. Why, bless your heart! we all, every one of us, commenced life itself in this very fashion; found ourselves plump in the middle of things, as you might say, and ready to carry on; and some of us, no doubt, did carry on to the full capacity of our lungs. I did for one, but John Henry Millman did not. He was a funniment from the first. I saw him when he was a few moments old, and he impressed me with his excessive solemnity: but that all took place in the other story which does not matter.

Well, John Henry Millman was walking up Blank Street, Soho, and towards the tube station; Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds were walking down Blank Street, Soho, and away from the tube station; and nothing on earth could have prevented their meeting face to face, for they were walking on the same pavement, if Little David had not made a last and despairing effort to escape from the Dainty Brute. Little David did do so, however, and immediately a crowd appeared as if by magic from nowhere; surrounded the pair; and formed an effective barrier between John Henry Millman and the two gentlemen who occupied his thoughts. John Henry, I hasten to add, was, at this important epoch in his life, fully eight and twenty years of age. I add this lest you might be led astray by his age mentioned in the previous paragraph. John Henry

was a remarkable child, a *most* remarkable child, although only one other person apart from myself thought so at the time, but he was not so remarkable as that. He showed no inclination to walk up Blank Street or any other street, except, perhaps, the streets of the hearts of two very foolish people, till a fit and seemly age arrived.

Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds, wise and prudent members of society, paused on the outskirts of the crowd and peered over the heads of the people towards the centre and cause of disturbance. There appeared to be a disturbance, too, and one of some magnitude. Little David, shaking consumedly, with a white face, terror-ridden eyes, and every outward appearance of excessive fright and distress, was making a frenzied appeal, to no one in particular, to be rescued from his captor. The Dainty Brute—his real name was Isaac Farstein—dressed in beautifully cut clothes, with a silk hat on his head, a flower in his buttonhole, and a pained expression on his handsome face, held Little David firmly by the scruff of the neck with one hand; extended the other hand in rapid gestures reminiscent of the tribe from which he had sprung; and explained matters to the attentive crowd.

“He is my son,” said the Dainty Brute, in a quivering voice, “my only child, and I, myself, am responsible for this. I have loved him too much, treated him too well, and now he is repaying me with black ingratitude. Twice he has been saved from prosecution by a miracle, and at last I have caught him red-handed. When I have refused to supply more money than was good, he has stolen it. I have tried kindness, but now I must resort to force. To-day I followed him to a pawnshop, and found him there in the act of disposing of his poor mother’s engagement ring.”

The Dainty Brute extracted a diamond ring from his pocket and held it aloft for inspection. There was a slight element of risk about this, but the Dainty Brute did not lack courage; also he thought the chance was small that the lady, from whom he had abstracted the ring on the previous night, might be in the crowd.

It was. She was, at that moment, bewailing her loss in Scotland Yard, in silks, furs, and a flood of tears; and her description of the missing article was sufficiently incoherent to be more useful to the Dainty Brute than to the police.

The crowd saw the ring flash in the sunlight; saw the well dressed, saddened man; noted that Little David did not deny the charge but continued to struggle and appeal in a frenzied fashion; and they murmured sympathetically. Little David was too far gone over the borders of terror to listen to what was said about him. The crowd, without exception, sided with the Dainty Brute. Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds voiced the general opinion.

"A gentleman—obviously. Look at his clothes!" said Sinclair Dodds.

"Rich, I should imagine," murmured Ralph Seymour. "The ring is very handsome. Poor fellow, it is a sad case. He feels it too. It is written on his face. The boy should be thrashed till he is sore!"

"I have a good mind to speak to him," said Sinclair Dodds. "Our office is near at hand. He might prove useful. One never knows—!" His voice trailed into silence. His expression altered. He seemed to grow at least six inches taller. He became, in a moment, something that was grand, and awe-inspiring, and majestic. He was no longer a mere man, but one wrapped in the mantle of an immense dignity.

"Yes!" said Ralph Seymour. "You were about to—!" He paused abruptly, and the same remarkable alteration took place in his appearance. Any one who looked could not have failed to notice this, but no one did look. The interest was centred on Little David and his captor.

"John Henry Millman!" breathed Ralph Seymour.

"Precisely!" responded Sinclair Dodds.

They stood—but I shall not now explain how they stood or the reason for all this, that will come later on and in its proper place. John Henry Millman advanced through the crowd, paying no

attention to any one, absorbed in his own thoughts; and when John Henry was thoroughly absorbed in his own thoughts he was quite capable of failing to see his best friends, or his worst enemies, if they rubbed shoulders with him in passing. He forged ahead steadily, reached the heart of the crowd and paused, his progress impeded by Little David who, by now, was almost hysterical and perilously near the verge of tears.

"Take me away from him!" pleaded Little David, and he held out both hands imploringly, but he did not cease to struggle and his actions were rapid and spasmodic like the movements of a marionette: a marionette where the strings are faulty and the doll may collapse at any moment.

The words penetrated to John Henry's intelligence, and dispelled his thoughts. He regarded the white, strained face, and the small, struggling figure with attention, and he shot a keen glance at the Dainty Brute.

"Certainly," he said, without hesitation, and he wrenched the boy free with a sudden dive which left the Dainty Brute gasping with astonishment. The boy, released, clung to John Henry's coat with both hands, buried his face in the cloth, and fell to shuddering violently. John Henry slipped an arm protectingly round his shoulders and turned to face the Dainty Brute who, by now, had recovered himself. The crowd growled with antagonism.

"How dare you snatch my son out of my hands?" demanded the Dainty Brute furiously. "You shall pay for this! Where is a policeman?" and he attempted to lay hold of Little David.

John Henry warded off the attempt with his free arm, caught the wrist of the Dainty Brute in a grasp of steel, and, experiencing a sudden desire to sneeze, fumbled with his other hand in an inner breast pocket.

"There is no necessity to call a policeman," he said evenly, "for I am—" he paused abruptly, forgot to sneeze, and abandoned the search for his handkerchief at one and the same time.

The Dainty Brute, with an action quite as sudden as John

Henry's, had wrenched himself free, forced a way through the crowd, and was lost to sight in a moment round the corner of the street.

"—About to lead you to one," ended John Henry mechanically. "You poor little fellow," he said in an altered voice. "There is nothing to fear now, for he has gone."

Little David moved a trifle, clung closer, and burst into a torrent of passionate weeping. John Henry slipped his other arm round him, and the action brushed back the sleeve of Little David's coat, disclosing cruel, livid marks on the wrist and arm. The crowd gasped and became vastly sympathetic. Ralph Seymour voiced the general thought and Sinclair Dodds gave his hearty approval.

"I knew the man was bad the moment I set eyes on him," he said with conviction. "The boy has been treated shamefully. I do not believe that he is his son. The man thought John Henry Millman was a plain-clothes detective and fled. My heart bleeds for the little creature!"

At that moment round the corner of the street appeared a police officer who rapidly forced his way through the crowd. You may wonder that one had not appeared before, but although this has taken a long time to tell, it happened all in the space of a few moments: also Blank Street is a very baby of a street, and too small to justify much attention from the police.

"Now, what is all this about?" inquired the officer. "What are you all doing here?"

A dozen mouths opened to reply, but they remained open and speechless. John Henry had looked up from the boy and round the ring of faces, and the expression of John Henry, just then, was rather fierce than otherwise.

"They are going away at once," said John Henry with emphasis and some slight scorn. "They are going very quickly because they know just what I think about them, and if they wait a few seconds longer they will hear it too!"

The crowd dispersed hurriedly and in silence, and with them went Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds. As a point of interest it should be noted that these latter gentlemen had lost the dreadful majesty which had enveloped them at the approach of John Henry. Indeed they were quite indistinguishable from the others, and this—when you learn about them later on—you will wonder at as I do, for it was John Henry's words which wrought the change—a most extraordinary phenomenon.

The constable, a young fresh faced officer, rubbed his chin and stood regarding John Henry and Little David with distrust and considerable disfavour. The crowd, having retired to a respectable distance, hung about in groups talking with animation, obviously devoured with curiosity, and seemingly half minded to return. John Henry, with a total disregard of the stalwart arm of the law, gave all his attention to Little David who, making a valiant attempt to stop weeping, sniffed, and shook, and held on to John Henry's coat as a drowning man might cling to a spar.

"All right, little brother," said John Henry gently, "you are quite safe with me. We shall go away together and no one shall harm you if I can help it."

Little David raised a white, twitching face, glanced in a scared, inquiring fashion at John Henry, and apparently satisfied with his survey, tightened the grip of one hand and releasing the other, commenced to dabble his eyes with an extremely dirty handkerchief. John Henry, producing a clean one, offered it as a substitute. The constable—he had a wife and child of his own—leant forward on a sudden impulse born of the sight of Little David's face.

"Terrified out of his wits, he is," he said. "Poor little chap! You take him away quietly before I hear anything about it." His manner altered and he became statuesque. He frowned on John Henry and his voice was loud and commanding. "Now then, *will* you move on! Obstructing the pavement, you are! Next

time your brother wants to weep in public, take a bus to Epping Forest; it's quiet under the trees!"

John Henry stopped a taxi-cab and half lifting Little David, deposited him inside and followed himself. As the cab swung into Charing Cross Road the remnants of the crowd, swarming round the constable, overwhelmed him with a babel of talk. I have no record of what the people said, or the constable replied; all I know is that the matter ended there so far as they were concerned.

Little David crouched in one corner of the cab, with his face buried in his hands, while his shoulders twitched and his body shook in a fashion that affected John Henry's throat, making it necessary for him to cough violently. He sat in the other corner of the cab and studied the boy with attention, and as he did this his cough increased in violence till it became a positive nuisance, so that he was obliged to execute a complicated manoeuvre with his handkerchief. This appeared to ease matters, although it is worthy of note that John Henry's cough affected his eyes quite as much as it troubled his throat. An interesting phenomenon which, no doubt, a doctor could easily explain.

Little David was small, and slender, and obviously very young. John Henry decided that he must be about twelve or fourteen years of age; and having reached this decision he thought that the lad was too tall for that age; and then he recalled what he had seen of his face and came to the conclusion that he was older; and finally he abandoned the point as of no importance. The boy was dressed in a lounge suit of grey cloth, a soiled fawn overcoat which was much too wide and a trifle too long, and he had a cloth cap pulled well down over the head which partly concealed the face. His hands and feet were very small, and the former were very dirty. His head appeared to fill the cap, which was large, very completely; and all that John Henry could see of him was this huge cap resting on the top of the overcoat with the two small grubby hands spread over the face. A lurch of the cab sent the boy against

the side and the loose sleeves of the coat slipped back from his wrists, and this brought on John Henry's cough with redoubled violence.

"I always cough when I am in a cab," said John Henry with dignity. "I do it on purpose to let the driver know I am not afraid of him, and have enough money to pay the fare."

Little David made no response.

"I cannot bear to see you sitting shuddering with those cruel marks on your arms," said John Henry, when he could contain himself no longer. "I want to stop the cab, get out, and kill somebody. I don't care what you have done, no one has the right to maltreat a child so savagely!"

Little David started and stopped shaking. He moved so that he faced John Henry, but he did not remove his hands. The fingers separated a trifle, however, and from behind them John Henry knew that he was being searchingly scrutinized. Little David abruptly transferred his gaze from John Henry's face to the cab, and from the cab to the street outside, and his hands fell by his sides.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, and he grasped the seat as if prepared to spring out at a moment's notice.

The white face, wide-open terrified eyes, and the soft quivering lips seen in the shelter of the huge cap, made it difficult for John Henry to reply with his customary clearness of speech. He was a trifle startled, too, for he had no definite idea as to where they were eventually going. He had told the man to drive to Paddington, selecting the place because it was some distance away with a view to eluding a possible pursuit by the constable, the crowd, or the Dainty Brute, but their ultimate destination he had expected to learn from Little David himself.

"At present we are going to Paddington," he said, after a second, "and from there we shall go just wherever you please. If you tell me where you live, I shall take you home."

Little David shuddered.

"I cannot go home," he said in a whisper. "I am afraid Father would turn me out."

"The brute!" said John Henry with indignation. "By the way, the man in the silk hat, surely *he* was not your father!"

The mention of the Dainty Brute affected Little David much as the sight of a man-eating tiger might affect a normal gentleman, if—on looking over his shoulder on the top of a bus—he saw one seated behind him. He shook with terror, glanced wildly around as if the Dainty Brute might be concealed in the cab, and slipping along the seat, grasped John Henry's coat with both hands.

"Promise to take me away from him," he gasped. "He might catch me again and then I shall be lost for ever. You *will* protect me! I am so frightened! He is not my father. They call him the Dainty Brute, and he is bad—wicked! He beat me when I refused to do what he asked. He would have killed me if he had not been afraid. He took me away in a car and I escaped, but he caught me again in the street. I had no place to go to, and the crowds of people confused me. You *will* take me away?"

The words came in a rapid torrent of speech. John Henry, looking down at the small face at his elbow, marvelled at the delicate, finely modelled features of the little fellow, and at his pitiable state of fear. He spoke and acted just as any other man would have done in like circumstances. He drew Little David close to him and patted his head reassuringly.

"I *am* taking you away," he said, "and shall continue to do so till you tell me to stop. As for the Dainty Brute you have nothing to fear from him. I shall look after you till your father is eager to do so. Fathers, you know, are apt to be fierce at times, but the fierceness comes from the heart; and when the heart is lonely it forgets everything except how much it is missing a loved one who is lost. It takes time, occasionally, for this to come about, but it does come about sooner or later. Of that there is no doubt."

Little David retreated to his corner, but he retained a hold on John Henry's coat with one hand.

"My father does not care what happens to me," he said. "He never speaks except to tell me to be quiet, or to ask me to leave the room. He has more consideration for his dogs."

John Henry covered the hand which grasped his coat with both his own.

"You are not afraid of me?" he asked.

"No," said Little David. "Not just now."

"Very good," said John Henry, "then I shall take you home. I have one room, a large window, a cat, and Veronica. They will all welcome you. You can sleep in my bed and I can camp out on the rug. I live near Paddington. We can walk from the station."

The covered hand quivered.

"I cannot do that. She would hate me," said Little David with extraordinary vehemence. "I must go away from London. I would be afraid, terrified, to pass another night here shut in by all these houses, listening to steps in the street and imagining that they had come to take me with each knock at the door. I must go to the country where it is quiet and you can run into the woods and hide."

"I defy any one who looks at you to hate you, least of all Veronica," said John Henry. "You are such a pretty little fellow. There is something odd about you, too, that is very appealing; still, if you do not wish to go home, we shall not go there. What is your name, little brother?"

Little David drew his coat closely around him and partly disappeared behind the collar. A tinge of colour crept into his cheeks and he appeared to be unsettled in his mind.

"David is my name," he said, and the words came as if jerked from his lips by some power apart from his own control.

John Henry gave the hand under his own a gentle squeeze.

"To me," he said, "you shall always be Little David, and as this is Paddington, Little David, we must get out."

They got out. John Henry tendered a note to the taxidriver who had no change. Then he commenced to search his pockets,

unearthing stray coins of various denominations, but the total was insufficient. A porter, volunteering to supply change, did so to the nearest shilling. John Henry paid the fare, thanked the porter, pocketed his collection of coins; and all this time Little David stood beside him quivering and casting fearful glances at every passer-by and never, for one second, slackening his hold on John Henry's coat.

"Now then, Little David," said John Henry, and clasping the hand which grasped his coat he entered the station, walked with assurance towards the booking office, and it was not till the exasperated clerk had twice asked him where he wanted to go to, that John Henry remembered he did not know. This was due to the fact that he was thinking profoundly.

"Where are we going, Little David?" he asked.

"Tipping Horley," said Little David.

"Two thirds to Tipping Horley," said John Henry.

"You are quite sure you want to go there?" sarcastically inquired the clerk.

"Quite!" said John Henry, and he spoke the simple truth.

At that Little David took a second, and even firmer grasp of John Henry's coat with his other hand, and in this fashion they went in search of a train. Now it is odd but a fact that John Henry did not think there was anything strange about this. He did not even think about it at all. His mind was filled with the thought that Little David was holding fast, not to his coat, but to his heart. A foolish notion, but foolish notions found a ready home in the mind of John Henry Millman. He was born like that. You must not blame him. It was not his fault.

CHAPTER II

THE BLACK BULL AT TIPPING HORLEY

You may wonder what sort of a man John Henry Millman was, and I hasten to assure you that he was quite a nice man to look at. Little David thought so, and he had a good opportunity of studying him in the train. John Henry was of medium height, indeed he might be looked on as too short, but, since he was not overburdened with flesh, this was not apparent. He had a broad chest, powerful arms, and a body that was not without shape and comeliness. His hands were large with long, tapering fingers, and there was nothing remarkable about his feet. This may not sound very attractive, but on the top of it all was John Henry's head; and when you looked at his head, and in particular at his face, you were apt to take a more kindly view of the rest of his person. John Henry's head was massive and thatched with a close-cut crop of hair which curled when it was allowed to grow, and his face, which was open and homely, was beautified by the eyes and mouth. John Henry's eyes either looked at you directly with an honest inquiry that was exceedingly arresting, or else they gazed at you with a profound contemplation that held no bitterness or scorn. His mouth was small, with full, sensitive lips that had a trick of melting into sudden smiles of sympathy and understanding.

Little David sat, lost in the size of his coat and cap, and gazed at John Henry who faced him. He appeared to have forgotten his fears for the time being, and he remained very still. John Henry, who had a habit of noticing everything, perceived this and smiled; and when John Henry smiled he looked exceedingly attractive. Little David thought so and sighed, whereupon John Henry's

mind commenced to revolve round the problem of what was eventually to be done with Little David, and his face grew serious. He contemplated the small figure and became abstracted in a mist of conjecture, and pity, and odd imaginings; and as all these thoughts passed through his mind they were expressed on his face. They journeyed on in this manner—the train was a slow one and stopped at every station—till Little David suddenly sat up to announce that they had arrived at their destination.

John Henry, who by that time had successively selected a school, an occupation, and a successful career for Little David, returned to practical matters with a start, and descended from the train. Tipping Horley, to judge by the station, seemed a small place, and this it proved to be. They found themselves in the main street of the town as the clocks were striking ten.

“Now where,” asked John Henry, “are we going to spend the night?”

“I don’t know,” said Little David, and he took a timid hold of John Henry’s coat and once more commenced to shake.

“No!” said John Henry, slightly astonished. He considered the point for a second, and then arrived at a decision. “Of course you do not,” he said reassuringly, “but I do. We must find an inn, or its equivalent.”

They walked along the street, and a lighted shop, still open, attracted the attention of John Henry. He went towards it, entered, and it was not until he was right inside that John Henry realized the nature of the shop. It was small, diminutive, and the entire stock in trade appeared to be composed of the unmentionable garments which ladies wear next their skin. A stout, matronly female arose like an indignant fury from the rear of the premises; two young females, who were laying out goods in the foreground, paused in their task in confusion; and Little David uttered a sound that was surprisingly like a laugh.

John Henry, thoroughly winded, grew red, said nothing, and remained with a startled expression on his face.

"What do *you* want, young man?" inquired the stout female, and the emphasis she placed on the *you* held such a wealth of sarcastic meaning that John Henry experienced the sensations of a malefactor caught in the act of wrongdoing. He sought for an excuse for his presence and found one.

"I wish," he said, with great distinctness, "to buy two pairs of pyjamas. One pair large, and one pair small—for my wife and daughter," he added hurriedly, as the stout female opened her mouth to speak.

"*In-deed!*" said the stout female. She directed a searching glance at Little David, who immediately drew his coat around him and commenced to shake violently. "*In-deed*, and is this your wife, or your daughter?"

John Henry looked down at Little David and slipped an arm protectingly around him.

"This is my Little David," he said, "who is scared out of his wits because we are so far from home."

"*In-deed!*" repeated the stout female for the third time, but her business instincts overcame her curiosity. She drew out various bundles, and selecting two pair of pyjamas at which John Henry looked with alarm, tied them up in a parcel, pocketed the money, and following John Henry to the door, gave voice to a word of advice.

"I should advise you, young man, either to buy a pair of spectacles, or to study the ten commandments. Furthermore you might do your shopping within business hours and not when business people are stocktaking, and if you think your wife is going to be pleased with these pyjamas, you are making a great mistake."

John Henry was about to reply to this extraordinary utterance, but Little David, tugging at his sleeve, hurried him away before he had time to open his mouth. John Henry was not loath to go.

"I wonder what she meant?" he said.

Little David remained silent, but when the Black Bull hove in

sight, on the outskirts of the village, and they paused to look at it, he spoke.

"She was a horrid woman," said Little David, with quite unnecessary emphasis. "The way she looked at me! I hate her!"

John Henry started and stared at the boy with sudden curiosity.

"Extraordinary!" he said. "You spoke, just as I have heard Veronica speak, when she is talking about Mrs. Baldwin."

Now Mrs. Baldwin was a shrew with a bitter tongue, under which Veronica, who was devoted to John Henry, had frequently wilted. Little David, naturally, had no knowledge of either Veronica or Mrs. Baldwin, but he appeared to wish to divert John Henry's mind from the subject. He drew him towards the Black Bull.

The Black Bull is a small, two-storied inn, where the *élite* of the village consume their beer of an evening in the sanded bar; and where, on sundry occasions of state, high revelry is held in the long dining-room which serves as the sole public room of the house. John Henry, propelled by Little David, passed in through the open door with unnecessary haste, and halted before a rotund, red-faced gentleman, in shirt sleeves and white apron, who barred their progress with uplifted hand.

"Not to-night," said this jovial party, with decision. "Trade is trade, but never let your business interfere with your heart. That's my motto, and I never mean to forsake it. My heart's in there"—he jerked his thumb in the direction of a closed door on the right—"so it's no use arguing."

As if in answer to this statement, a loud and prolonged burst of cheering broke out in the room indicated, interspersed by a volley of taps and rappings, and followed by a babel of talk. The rotund gentleman, resting his hands on his hips, smiled in a jolly, rollicking fashion; nodded once or twice; and then continued his conversation.

"Breakfast, lunches, dinners, suppers, served in a commodious well-appointed, old English dining-room; best food and most

obliging waiters; parties catered for, large or small; cars accommodated, and horses put up. At your service, gentlemen, late and early; but never when the Tipping Horley Minstrels meet to discuss their art. I played the drum, myself, when there was less of me than there is now—and that is that.”

“Oh!” said John Henry. “I understand. Your dining-room is occupied. But what we want is a couple of rooms for the night. We have come too far, and cannot get home till morning.”

“There’s some in there,” said the rotund gentleman, again jerking his thumb, “as will go too far likewise, and be quite unable to get home till morning. The Flute is a rare lad! Listen to him!”

A mournful, distressing sound mingled with, and finally conquered the babel of talk. It increased in volume in jerks and sudden spurts, and reminded John Henry of some familiar tune, but what it was he was unable to determine. The rotund gentleman listened, with half-closed eyes and back-flung head, wafting himself backwards and forwards in an ecstasy. John Henry, from motives of delicacy, listened also; and Little David, who had commenced to shake again in real earnest, gave every sign of relapsing into the state of blind terror in which he had been when John Henry first met him.

The rotund gentleman, assuming an attitude of concentrated expectation, raised a warning finger. As if by magic, the music abruptly ceased. A confused murmuring arose, grew louder, and merged gradually into the former babel of talk.

“He always stops there—to wipe his eyes,” explained the rotund gentleman. “A born musician, he is, if ever there was one. That is only the third time he has tried to go through the whole piece to-night. He gets so worked up, he can’t go on nohow. They never cheer him. They have too much feeling. Make them weep, he will, when he is properly wound up to it, but it takes time.”

John Henry started, and Little David uttered a shriek, as the

door burst open, giving free passage to the noise and allowing two highly-elevated gentlemen to stagger out. They approached the rotund landlord, talking volubly, seized him one by either arm, and, in spite of his half-hearted protests, dragged him into the room and closed the door. Little David clung to John Henry's coat while his teeth chattered in his head. John Henry might have attempted to stop the landlord if it had not been for this. As it was he stood still and forgot about him.

"You will *not* see *him* again to-night," said a deep voice from the rear. "Nor to-morrow morning either, or I'm no judge."

John Henry, turning round, confronted the speaker who was a tall, thin, melancholy-looking man clad, like the landlord, in apron and shirt sleeves. The apron was soiled and bespattered with countless spots. He had a drooping moustache; a growth of beard which appeared to be unintentional; and he looked, on the whole, like a sorry and dispirited ghost. A cast in his eyes gave him a weird expression, and he did not gaze at John Henry but, apparently, away and past him at some far distant prospect.

"Half past twelve to-morrow," said the melancholy man with an air of finality, and he leant against the banisters—he stood at the foot of the stairs—as if it were his intention to remain there till that time arrived.

John Henry, considerably astonished, was at a loss for words. Little David, trembling like a leaf in the wind, regarded the melancholy man with distrust, and seemed in a half mind to flee. The latter gentleman, without altering his position or giving any sign that he saw the strangers, continued his conversation.

"Tipping Horley Minstrels!" he said with concentrated scorn. "Tippling Howling Maniacs! Music! Give me a penny comb and a piece of paper and I'll give you better. The Flute! Give me a knife, and I'll cut his throat. I would like to cut all their throats, but you can seldom do what you like. I've learnt that by now, and it's some consolation."

"Excuse me," interrupted John Henry, "but—"

"You! Carry the gentleman to No. 4. You! See that he is comfortable in bed. You! Stand by to help the gentlemen when they leave," continued the melancholy man, totally disregarding John Henry. "No room for any one in the inn to-night except our own friends, remember that, you! Remember everything and forget nothing; keep sober and have a smile on your face; run about all day and stand by all night; be the pot-boy, waiter, boots, porter, as the occasion arises; be the odd man and look the part as well; and do it all for next to nothing! It's enough," said the melancholy man, suddenly transferring the gaze of one eye from the distance and fixing John Henry with a wild and savage glare, "it's enough to force a man into matrimony instead of earning an honest living!"

As the melancholy man said this he clenched his right hand and, describing a half-circle in the air, brought it down with a crash on the rail of the stairs so that Little David jumped and screamed. John Henry, who had been sympathetically attentive, became immediately indignant.

"No necessity to make a noise and frighten people," he said fiercely. "Can you not see that the boy is scared out of his wits! We shall go away, Little David, and find an inn where the people are quiet."

"This is the only inn in the place," said the odd man, "and, as I've said before, all the rooms are booked. Go if you like, but I advise you to stay where you are. I'm an honest man, but I'm poor. The rooms are booked, but it is myself that will help the people up, and lock them in till such time as the house is quiet. They will all want to spend the night here and go home sober in the morning, and there is not enough room for the half of them."

"You mean?" said John Henry interrogatively, and his hand disappeared into his pocket.

The odd man smiled, pocketed a coin, and recalling his other eye from the distance, applied it to a point reasonably near to

Little David—say about a couple of yards away. His expression altered and he bent forward confidentially.

“You can have a couple of rooms, or one room, or six rooms, just as you like. They”—He jerked his head in the direction of the closed door—“will know nothing about it, for you can lock the door. They will think it is one of themselves inside. You can have breakfast, pay your bill, and clear off before the boss awakens in the morning. I’ll see to that. You can trust me.”

John Henry’s hand again disappeared into his pocket.

“You can trust me—absolutely,” said the odd man, and he turned to ascend the stairs.

“We want two rooms,” said John Henry, preparing to follow, “side by side. Small rooms, you understand, that will not cost a fortune.”

Little David paused on the first step, relinquished his hold of John Henry’s coat, and became a picture of fear and distress.

“I’m frightened,” he said, “I could not spend the night alone in a room here, with people coming to the door. I should go mad!”

“We want one double-bedded room,” corrected John Henry. “One with a fire in it,” he added, as Little David shuddered, “and we want something to eat.”

Little David came slowly up the stairs, holding his coat closely around him, apparently mortally suspicious of everything, and ready to start in terror on the slightest provocation. The odd man ushered them into a long, narrow room lit by a gas-jet over the fireplace, where two narrow single beds stood side by side in the midst of an arid waste of nondescript carpet. He drew a couple of chairs up to the hearth and proceeded to light the fire. John Henry divested himself of his hat and coat, placed a table beside the chairs, and telling the odd man to go in search of food, went down on his knees in an attempt to coax the fire to burn brightly. Little David remained at the other end of the room by the door, in a forlorn and huddled attitude; and he watched John Henry, almost it seemed, with dread.

"It will burn," said John Henry, and he rose from his knees. Now, John Henry had been exercising his lungs after the fashion of a bellows, and, no doubt, the smoke had irritated his throat. This is a likely, and indeed the only sensible explanation for the fact that, the moment he turned from the fire and faced the room, he commenced to cough with violence. He went on coughing, too, for a considerable time, and the sound seemed to affect Little David, for his figure grew tense and rather like a runner who is waiting for the signal to start on a race. It was quite an odd sight.

Picture to yourself the long, dismal room, with its drab and sombre fittings, lit only by the single, wavering gas-jet; the newly-lighted fire, hissing and smoking in the grate; John Henry, on the hearth, contorting his face into grimaces as he coughed and spluttered; and at the far end of the room the small, tense figure of Little David, watching him with suspicion from within the shelter of the huge cap and coat; and think of a raucous din of talk and laughter, mingled with cheers, and rappings, and drunken exclamations, ascending from below and offending the quiet of the night!

"Come and sit down, Little David," said John Henry when he had conquered his cough. "Take off your coat and cap and warm yourself by the fire. You must be cold," and he went towards the boy on an impulse born of compassion at the sight of his pathetic appearance.

Little David watched his approach, motionless and in silence, but when John Henry stretched out a hand to divest him of his coat, he shrank back and cowered against the wall.

"Leave me alone!" he said with extraordinary passion. "If you touch me, I shall bite your arm!"

John Henry's arm fell to his side. He experienced the sensation of one who has been unexpectedly struck full in the face, and he was hurt, but he merely said:

"Very good, Little David, I shall not touch you. You do just

as you please. I think you should sit down and warm yourself. I shall go and try to hurry up the supper."

"I refuse to eat anything," said Little David defiantly.

John Henry left the room without a word. He was hurt to the quick, not so much by the words of the boy, which, he judged, arose from fear, but by the fact that the boy was so obviously afraid of him. This, John Henry felt, was scarcely justified. He went down the stairs with a rising sense of indignation and it occurred to him that, as he knew nothing about the boy except that he had been ill-treated, there might be some reason for the ill-treatment. By the time he had found the odd man, however, his irritation had vanished, and he added a glass of whisky to the laden tray with the idea that the spirits might make the lad drowsy and inclined to sleep. Having given the odd man instructions to waken them in good time in the morning, he ascended the stairs, carrying the tray, and followed by a string of pungent remarks on the subject of the Tipping Horley Minstrels.

John Henry was half way up the stairs when the odd man stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence, struck apparently by some idea which startled, interested, and finally amused him, so that he slapped his leg and laughed with genuine mirth. John Henry was sufficiently astonished to pause, look down, and inquire the cause of this. The odd man looked up. In fact he stepped out into the hall and stared up at John Henry with evident curiosity.

"It's nothing," said the odd man, after a moment. "I thought it was, but I can see that it is not. It's funny, yet it's not funny at all—but it does make me wish to strangle these noisy, drunken fools. I wish you good-night, sir," and he refused to utter a word of explanation.

John Henry went on, mystified, with the thought in his mind that the odd man, seen from above, seemed different. He did. Seen from below, at that moment, he also seemed different, but of this John Henry did not think. What he did think was that,

perhaps, we, all of us, look different seen from above. The thought pleased him and he felt convinced that it must be true, for the odd man seemed to be vastly improved. There was something in his face which John Henry liked, something which had escaped his notice down below. John Henry decided that it must be the same with everybody, and the thought cheered him, for he had a habit of studying faces, and very often the scrutiny left him far from happy. I, for one, believe that his decision was correct. I cannot, no, I cannot, think otherwise. It must be so, even with the Dainty Brute, and he, as you will learn later on, deserved his name.

CHAPTER III

THE BLACK BULL AT TIPPING HORLEY

(continued)

JOHN HENRY entered the bedroom; placed the tray on the table by the fire; returned to shut the door which he locked; and, sitting down in one chair, set himself to arrange the supper with assiduity. Little David sat, bent over the fire, on the extreme edge of the other chair. He still wore both his coat and cap. The former was wrapped round him more completely than it had been before, while the latter was pulled so low over his face that little of it could be seen except the point of his nose and chin. He had been warming his hands at the fire when John Henry entered, but when John Henry sat down opposite to him his hands clutched the front of his coat, and he seemed to regard him with a deep distrust.

"Eggs, boiled bacon, bread, butter, jam, and coffee," said John Henry, paying no attention to this. "What will you start on, Little David? I am very hungry myself, so you must wire in at once. I rather imagine that I had no lunch."

Little David made no reply, and he kept his eyes fixed on John Henry's face as if seeking to read his thoughts, or watching for some expected and unpleasant development.

"Coffee!" said John Henry persuasively. He held out a cup, looked directly at the point of Little David's nose, and smiled. "It smells good," he added, and this was a fact. The coffee did smell good.

Little David's hand went out. He took the cup mechanically, placed it untasted on his knee, and continued to watch John

Henry's face. John Henry transferred some boiled bacon to a plate, chipped the top off an egg, buttered a couple of slices of bread, set them at one end of the table, and shifted the table itself within easy reach of Little David's hand. Then he sat back in his chair.

"I'm hungry," he said, "but I cannot start eating till you have commenced. You must be hungry for you look famished. If there is anything else you fancy, I shall go and forage for it!"

Now it may have been due to the fact that Little David was starving; or it may have been that the aromatic fumes of the coffee, rising up under his nose and gathering in a cloud of steam beneath the huge cap, obscured his vision; or it may have been that he was satisfied with his scrutiny of John Henry's face. It is quite impossible to tell. The fact remains that, quite without any obvious reason, he suddenly seemed to lose sight of John Henry altogether, and applying himself to the food before him, ate, and ate, as if he had not had a meal for days. John Henry sat still, and watched, and smiled, and replenished Little David's cup; and it was not until the boy desisted with a sigh of contentment, that he perceived there was little or nothing left for himself.

"Splendid!" said John Henry. "If you drink this little drop of whisky and go to bed, Little David, you will sleep like a top. To-morrow morning you will be as strong as a pony, and then you can tell me what you want to do."

Little David's fears, and suspicions, and his distrust for John Henry, returned at once as if by magic. His figure stiffened—he had leant back comfortably in his chair—and shrunk within his clothes. He shivered, drew his coat tightly around him, and cast a glance in the direction of the door. John Henry perceived all this, but he paid no attention. He poured away half the whisky, added a little water, and held out the glass.

"It will taste nasty," he said, "but it will make you sleep."

Little David, with a sudden motion, snatched the glass from his hand and threw the contents into the fire. John Henry could

not ignore this. He was hurt, too, and a trifle annoyed. He was hungry, also, for he *had* forgotten about lunch, and his appetite, being seldom fully satisfied, was always good.

"I have no wish," he said, "to force anything on you against your will. It was merely suggested for your own good. I think you should go to bed, but in that also you must please yourself. You seem to be suspicious of me without cause. I have no motive except to benefit you. You did not distrust me in the street and on the way down here, why are you doing so now?"

Little David shivered, but he made no reply.

John Henry rose, shifted back the table, crossed to the bed, and returned with the parcel containing the pyjamas. This he opened, spreading the garments out before the fire, and as he did so, he grew very red in the face. The one pair was small and struck John Henry as being quite appropriate for Little David in spite of sundry frills and a curious formation at the termination of the legs. The other pair was large and may have struck Little David as appropriate for John Henry, but he did not think so—in fact, he looked at them with great disfavour.

"Positively immoral!" said John Henry in an undertone of vexation. "I shall hate wearing these things, but it cannot be helped."

This remark seemed, in some strange fashion, to ease while it did not dispel Little David's attitude of suspicion. He gave vent to a gasping sound which caused John Henry to look at him with curiosity, whereupon Little David immediately commenced to quiver. The sight made John Henry forget his vexation.

"You poor, little, scared creature," he said. "You have nothing to fear from me. Whatever have you done, or what has been done to you, to make you so pitiably nervous? You are like a frightened bird," and he stretched out a hand to touch the boy reassuringly.

"Leave me alone!" said Little David with passion, and he retreated to the extreme edge of his chair. "I shall tell you—nothing!"

John Henry sighed and sought consolation in tobacco. He lit a pipe and sat smoking, staring at the fire, and waiting for Little David either to go to bed, or to give some indication of his wishes in the matter; but Little David sat still, perched on the edge of his chair, and every time John Henry moved, he gasped and glanced at him with apprehension. The situation puzzled John Henry till, with the memory of an incident in his own past life, a solution suddenly flashed on his mind. When he had been very young and very poor, John Henry had shared a room with a man much older than himself. He had been an extremely sensitive youth and his undergarments had been—they were still—exceedingly unsound. He had never shared a room with any one in his life, and, till he grew accustomed to it, had gone through an exquisite torture under the scrutiny of the elder man's eyes. It occurred to John Henry that the same might be the case with Little David.

"I am going to bed," he said, and he lifted the offending pyjamas, "but first of all I must have a bath. I shall be some little time, but you will be quite safe by yourself."

As John Henry said this, he moved towards the door, and as he opened the door, a babel of sound arose from below. It was evident that the melancholy odd man was about to assist one, or more, gentlemen to a much required rest. Little David sprang to his feet in terror.

"You must not go away," he said. "They might come in here!"

"You can lock the door," said John Henry coldly, "and keep it locked till I come back."

Little David seemed reassured by this, but in a moment he was lost again in a fresh terror.

"That would never do," he said, "because—" and he paused, gazing at John Henry with dread.

"Yes!" said John Henry, still very coldly.

"Because they might knock and I might open the door, thinking it was you," said Little David.

John Henry regarded the boy sharply. Then he removed the key from the lock.

"Very good," he said, "I shall lock the door on the outside and then no one can get in but myself," and he suited the action to the word.

"Of all the absurd figures!" he muttered, ten minutes later, as he looked with horror at his reflection in the glass. "If I should meet anyone in the passage! These frills round my ankles!"

His apprehensions were in some measure justified. He was an absurd figure, and he looked decidedly funny in the pyjamas intended for a stout and elderly matron of ample development. Outside the locked door, he sighed with relief, and then the thought that Little David would view the absurdity reduced him to a jelly. Blushing hotly, but carrying himself with an odd, and in the circumstances ludicrous dignity, he unlocked the door and entered the room. On the threshold he halted in utter amazement, and all thought of his appearance fled in a burst of righteous indignation. The aspect of the room had altered completely. There was no fear that Little David might laugh at him, for Little David had, to all intents and purposes, disappeared from sight.

A sense of self-preservation impelled John Henry to close and lock the door. Having done this, he remained still, grasping his discarded clothes in both arms, and viewed his surroundings. The two beds in the middle of the floor had parted company. The one stood at the far end by the fire and directly beneath the window. The other John Henry could have touched by stretching out his hand. It was close up to the door. There was a chair between it and the wall, and on the chair were Little David's coat and cap and, presumably, his other clothes as well, but they were not visible. John Henry could not help thinking that the boy must have been wearing very little under his coat. The pile on the chair was so exceedingly small. In the bed was Little David himself, buried in the bed-clothes so completely that nothing but a tuft of dark hair could be seen.

The meaning of the arrangement was not lost on John Henry, and it was this which roused his indignation. The occupier of the bed by the door could watch the bed by the window without being seen in the darkness, while the head of the bed by the window would be clearly illuminated by the lamp in the street outside. The occupier of the bed by the door could nip out, and be away out of the door and down the passage, in a second, if so minded. The angle of the bed in relation to the door made this very apparent.

John Henry, having absorbed all these points, marched across the room with austere dignity and missed the sight of his reflection in the glass; a reflection that could have made his hair rise on end. He was indignant and felt that he did not deserve such treatment at the hands of the boy he had befriended. He piled his clothes on a chair, reflecting that, as the boy had told him nothing, he might be implicating himself in a matter from the consequences of which it might be difficult to escape. He might, for example, be an accessory to a crime. The thought deterred him from extinguishing the light. He stood before the fire, gazing at the bed where Little David lay concealed, uncertain what to do. The entire business seemed odd and suspicious, now that he came to think about it. What, for example, had Little David done to make the Dainty Brute wish to detain him; why had he chosen Tipping Horley as a place of refuge; what was the object of his sudden distrust of John Henry; and why, if he were innocent, had he taken such elaborate precautions for escape? John Henry, thinking of all these things, commenced to view himself in the light of a fool. He was poor, practically penniless, and this little jaunt would cost him a pretty sum. There was another point on which the mind of John Henry dwelt, for a fraction of a second, but he dismissed it as caused by the wearing of the absurd pyjamas. He found it hard to keep his thoughts strictly decent and moral in that fantastic garb. It was strange, but it was the case.

He decided to interrogate Little David, and settle the matter once and for all; and he commenced to walk down the room with that intention. He walked slowly and softly, for it was in his mind that, if the boy were asleep, it would be a shame to disturb him. His recollections of the white, scared face were too vivid to allow of any wish to do that. In the middle of the room he halted, and then went on swiftly. He had distinctly seen the small form of the boy, outlined under the clothes, quiver and become strained and tense; and he had heard his breath catch in a sob of fear. The two, taken together, swept away all John Henry's doubts, and indignations, and imaginings. He reached the side of the bed and, bending down, touched the boy gently on the shoulder.

"Is there anything I can do for you—little brother?" he asked, and the tone of his voice was far from harsh.

Little David seemed to shrivel under his touch. The tuft of hair receded under the clothes, but his voice was neither muffled nor uncertain.

"Put out the light and leave me alone!" said Little David.

John Henry started back, and, indeed, there was some reason in this, for Little David spat out the words rather than spoke them. John Henry was human. He returned to the fire, walking rapidly, extinguished the light, and climbed into bed obsessed with a sensation of utter indignation. As a matter of interest it may be noted that there were only two points which roused his wrath. The one was when his feelings were hurt either by the sight of some one in unnecessary suffering, or by an uncalled for trampling on his own generous impulses. The other was when anything foolishly disparaging was said about his work. On all other points of annoyance John Henry remained calm, and seemingly unmoved. He had sufficient sense to know that they did not matter. On the present occasion he was thoroughly indignant because he was hurt to the quick.

It was very quiet in the long, dark room after John Henry had

settled himself in bed; so quiet that he could hear the quick, uneven breathing of the boy at the other end of the room. The sound would have affected John Henry if he had not been so indignant. As it was he steeled his heart and refused to listen. The revellers, down below, were quiet. Possibly they were listening to an oration, or else the Flute had recommenced his doleful tune. In any case the walls must be thick, John Henry reflected, and the thought filled him with thankfulness. He attempted to go to sleep, but he could not. The light from the lamp outside fell across his pillow. He was distressingly awake, and the ridiculous pyjamas annoyed him, causing his thoughts to stray into strange and unseemly channels. That pyjamas should have such an effect on his mind worried John Henry. He lay on one side with annoyance written plainly on his face. The light, which was strong, showed this; and Little David, who was watching, saw it distinctly.

A low, stifled sound broke the stillness. John Henry knew what it was at once, but he paid no attention. Little David was weeping, sobbing into his pillow. John Henry, in spite of himself, grew uneasy. Little David went on, sobbing and sniffing, and doing it all in a subdued and hopeless fashion. John Henry steeled his heart, turned on his back, and lay staring up at the ceiling. Presently the sobbing ceased, but a fresh sound arose. Little David had moved, indeed John Henry was of the opinion that he had arisen from bed and stood on the floor, but he gave the matter no consideration. There was a rustling, the sound of light footfalls, and then a slender, white-clad form bent over John Henry, two hands rested on the edge of his bed, and a pair of soft, quivering lips brushed across his cheek.

"I'm sorry," said Little David in a quivering voice, and he fled precipitately back to bed.

John Henry's indignation wavered, would, indeed, have entirely disappeared if it had not been for the effect of the objectionable pyjamas, which, in some strange fashion, had increased. He

commenced to be angry with himself, and so his voice was short and cutting.

"That is all right," he said. "There is no necessity to worry about me."

There was a silence during which John Henry continued to glare angrily at the ceiling, and then Little David made a statement.

"I was crying because you have been so kind to me, and I was so unkind to you," he said in a small voice.

John Henry moved restlessly and became increasingly angry—with himself.

"Don't bother to think about it," he said. "Try and go to sleep."

There was a long period of silence during which John Henry got rid of the thoughts stirred by the pyjamas. He had turned on his side, preparatory to making a valiant effort to sleep, when a sudden and raucous din of shouting and stamping arose from below. Some of the Tipping Horley Minstrels were going home, and their condition being jovial, the noise was great. Little David sat up in bed with a shriek.

"What was that?" he gasped. "I am afraid!" and this he seemed to be, for his voice shook in a surprising fashion.

"Nothing," said John Henry. "They are going home. That is all."

Little David relapsed, but he did not remain still. John Henry could hear him turning, and tossing, and starting at imaginary noises. A second and prolonged outburst came from below and, although Little David did not move, John Henry heard him stifle his startled shriek in a gasp, and his bed creaked in a distressing fashion. The sound of voices, talking in loud, indistinct tones, became audible; then heavy, uncertain footsteps came up the stairs; and there seemed to be something in the nature of a struggle going on in the passage. John Henry imagined that the odd man was assisting some one to bed, and he was correct. What Little David thought is hard to tell, but he seemed to be scared almost

out of his wits. John Henry, more at ease with himself, spoke to him reassuringly.

"Pay no attention," he said. "They have no wish to disturb us. They are merely merry, and possibly not quite sober."

"They frighten me," said Little David, "because I imagine I am back in that horrible place. I think that they are coming for me, and then I am terrified. I am so tired; but when I sleep, I dream, and then the noise makes me think that my dreams are true."

"Poor child!" said John Henry, but his voice was still a trifle harsh owing to the objectionable pyjamas.

Little David was silent, for a few moments, then he spoke in a very small voice.

"May I—may I move my bed closer to you?" he asked humbly.

"You may," said John Henry. "Shall I help you?"

"Oh no!" said Little David, with a sudden note of panic in his voice. "I can do so by myself as I did before."

"The boy is one quivering mass of nerves," thought John Henry. "He is afraid of me the moment I approach him," but he said nothing. He strained his eyes in the darkness, however, and watched the small white figure struggling with the bed. Little David edged it across the floor cornerwise, lifting one end and carrying it a short distance, and then doing the same to the other end. In this fashion he approached John Henry, making surprisingly little noise. As he drew nearer John Henry thought, that if he himself presented a peculiar appearance, Little David was no better. His figure puzzled him. He had never seen, or imagined, anything quite like it; and John Henry's imagination worked well. There were places where Little David almost appeared to bulge, and he filled the pyjamas in a surprising fashion considering the impression of slenderness created in his out-door clothes. Once, too, when his head was outlined against a patch of light on the wall, John Henry was filled with amazement. The boy's head seemed abnormally large, like the head of a Roman Emperor on a

coin, only the shape was weird and fantastic. It was almost as if his hair grew very thickly and stood on end in a solid mass by some means of its own. The thought occurred to John Henry that, perhaps, the boy *was* abnormal, and that would account for everything; but he abandoned the idea. It was dark and quite impossible to see with clarity. In daylight, without doubt, there would be nothing to wonder at.

Little David, bringing the two beds parallel with a narrow, dividing lane, concluded his task and paused panting beside his own. He crept under the blankets and lay at the uttermost edge of his bed away from John Henry who, watching him, perceived with astonishment that he had removed all the blankets save one. They were draped over the top rail of the bed, and, consequently, it was impossible to distinguish much of Little David in the gloom except for an indistinct shadow on the white pillow. John Henry returned to a frowning contemplation of the ceiling, for his thoughts once more commenced to wander under the influence of the objectionable pyjamas. He had no desire to entertain these thoughts, but they came, seemingly, of their own accord. It was very absurd, and most annoying.

The proximity to John Henry appeared to soothe Little David's nerves for, presently, his breathing grew regular and he fell asleep. Once he was thoroughly asleep, however, his condition altered. He commenced to turn, and toss, and moan, and he muttered to himself in a shrill, sobbing whisper. He behaved like a spirit in torment, or a fly in the hands of a dissecting child; and this speedily deadened the effect of the pyjamas on John Henry's mind, but, curiously enough, did not dispel it. That remained, like a shadow, hovering in the background; a shadow against which, John Henry felt, he must strive. At least he felt like that till he realized what a foolish thought it was to entertain under the circumstances.

The Tipping Horley Minstrels, down below, broke out into loud, enthusiastic, but slightly discordant cheers. The odd man in the

passage joined his voice to the chorus in shrill yaps—nothing else can describe them—of derision. The cheers gave place to a medley of sound that made John Henry start and sit up as if at the approach of a pestilence; and it was a full moment before he realized what it was. The Tipping Horley Minstrels were performing in concert. There was a resemblance to music, but it was faint—very faint indeed. John Henry looked towards Little David, expecting him to stir, but he did not. He had become still, and seemed to have fallen into a deep and peaceful sleep. This was far from the case, however, as subsequent events soon proved.

There was a distressing increase in the volume of sound, caused, no doubt, by the opening of the door. John Henry imagined that he heard steps on the stairs, but he was not certain. It was difficult to be certain of anything through the groaning and sighing of the instruments; but he did hear footsteps when the top of the stairs was reached. Whoever it was, was moderately sober, for he came along the passage with the determination of one who will brook of no denial. It passed through John Henry's mind that he was coming to their door, and at that moment Little David spoke, or rather his voice came, dull and fear-laden from between trembling lips.

"He is coming for me. He will not be content to beat me and go away!" The voice was low, like the moaning of a lost soul. "What shall I do! Oh, what shall I do!"

The uncanny part of the matter was that Little David did not sit up as he spoke. He did not seem to move so much as a finger, but lay inert as if stupefied by terror. John Henry opened his mouth to say something comforting, but the words were never uttered. The footsteps ceased; the door-handle rattled; some one rapped repeatedly and demanded admission in an angry voice. Little David leapt clean out of bed and his shriek startled John Henry who was half expecting something of the kind. As for the gentleman at the door, he was so unnerved that he fled. John

Henry could hear him crashing down the stairs, and the bang of the door as he returned to the room below.

"Oh!" gasped Little David, and John Henry could hear him shaking. "I must have been dreaming. I heard the step and thought it was the Dainty Brute!"

"You were asleep," said John Henry in a soothing voice, "and you will catch cold if you stand there. I can hear the teeth chattering in your head."

Little David remained where he was for a moment, then he spoke in an exceedingly small voice.

"May I shift my bed quite close to yours?" he asked.

"You may," said John Henry, and the dignity in his voice did not arise from indignation, as Little David imagined, but from the objectionable pyjamas, and of this Little David could not be expected to think.

The boy effected the change and slipped back into bed. He did not lie at the extreme edge, as he had done before, but a distinct shade nearer to the middle of the bed. This, under ordinary circumstances, would have pleased John Henry and swept away remnants of indignation still remaining but, oddly enough, his mind rushed off at a tangent in a wild train of thought, and this he put down to the pyjamas. There could be no other reason. He was so annoyed with himself that he snorted. Little David, hearing the snort, imagined that he was snorting at him.

The Tipping Horley Minstrels, having ceased their torturing exercises, John Henry again attempted to go to sleep, but his thoughts kept him awake. Little David drowsed for a few moments, woke up with a start and shuddered, drowsed again and moaned in his sleep, woke up again and chattered; and each time that he woke up he crept a shade nearer to John Henry. This, under ordinary circumstances, as has been stated before, John Henry would have been the first to perceive and appreciate. He did perceive it, but the effect on him was to make his thoughts wilder and more ungovernable. Under his breath John Henry cursed the

pyjamas. The Tipping Horley Minstrels commenced to go home in ones and twos, at odd intervals, and with unexpected bursts of energy. They made a noise, too, every man of them—shouting, laughing—some of them even appeared to be on the verge of tears. At each interruption Little David shook and quivered, became distressingly awake and sought to fall asleep, only to start up again in terror. John Henry, still struggling with the absurd fancies which kept crowding into his mind, spoke to him.

“You seem to be more afraid now than you were on our way to the train,” he said.

Little David received this remark in silence, but presently, after an exceptionally loud outburst from below, he spoke.

“I am so tired, and yet I cannot sleep. The moment I fall asleep, I dream, and I am terrified in my dreams. I am very miserable.”

“There is nothing to frighten you here,” said John Henry. “You must remember that you are safe, and that will help matters.”

Little David sniffed and again remained silent for a space, and when he did speak, his voice was so exceedingly small that it was scarcely a voice at all, and much more like a ghost of a voice.

“I keep forgetting,” he said, “but——”

“Yes!” said John Henry as Little David paused, and it is interesting to note that the objectionable pyjamas loomed larger in his mind, at this moment, than they had done before.

“If I might hold your hand!” said Little David, humbly, in a scarcely audible whisper.

“Bless the boy!” said John Henry. “Of course you may!” He suited the action to the word, and half leaning out of bed, stretched a hand towards where he judged Little David lay. Two hot little paws immediately closed upon it, gripping it tightly as if holding on for dear life, and at the touch, the disturbing thoughts raised by the objectionable pyjamas, his indignation and suspicions, everything passed from John Henry’s mind except one thought, and John Henry did not look upon it as a thought. He knew

that it was a fact. It was. Little David had taken a firm and lasting hold on his heart.

Little David may, or may not, have had thoughts on the subject. He fell asleep very soon, slept peacefully, and did not slacken his hold of John Henry's hand. When he thought that the boy was completely at rest, John Henry gently commenced to free himself, but immediately Little David grew restless and moaned, so he desisted. He made a second attempt later on, and then a third, and a fourth, but all with the same result; and when the Tipping Horley Minstrels became extra noisy, Little David did not waken, but he stirred and the grasp of his hands became tighter. John Henry made a last attempt, for he was in a stiff, uncomfortable attitude and his arm was growing strained, but it was no good. He resigned himself to a sleepless night. He did this very willing, if the truth be known, for the strain on his arm was more than compensated by the glow which he felt in another part of his anatomy. He was a very foolish man, was John Henry Millman.

He lay awake and thought, and the tenor of his thoughts must have been pleasing, for he smiled in the darkness in a particularly engaging fashion. When the Tipping Horley Minstrels ended their discussion on art in a wild outburst of varied sounds, and the inn became alive with trampling feet, he had a brief respite, for Little David awoke and sat up, but he still held on to John Henry's hand. The boy was half asleep, exceedingly scared, and not at all certain of where he was. John Henry spoke to him, patted him on the shoulder and insinuated him back into bed. He went, without much persuasion, and was soon fast asleep, still grasping John Henry's hand. The change of position eased John Henry, but he was far from comfortable stretched between the two beds, also his arm ached consumedly.

He did not think about that, however, but he did meditate on a surprising fact which he had discovered when Little David slipped back into bed. The boy was fully dressed beneath the

pyjamas, and this accounted for the curious, bulging appearance. It was all very odd, and you might have thought so also, if you had been in John Henry's place. He gave up thinking, after a time, for he grew very weary and sore, but he set his teeth and forced himself to remain still. Little David did not move, but slept on one side, heavily and peacefully; and, as the dawn commenced to show under the window-blind, John Henry also fell asleep, but he knew all the time he was sleeping that there was something he must do, and that was to remain still. It was quite a quaint and pleasing sight for the sun to peep at the first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID DISAPPEARS

JOHN HENRY commenced to dream that he was back at school, a child again, sitting humbly under the iron rule of "Skinny" Purvis. "Skinny"—she was an elderly female of hen-like appearance, devoid of flesh but full of brimstone—believed in educating a child to a strict moral standard. She believed also in hell as depicted by the pastor of a small Nonconformist chapel, and she had an intimate knowledge of the Spanish Inquisition. Amalgamating the two in her mind, she arrived at something which struck terror into the hearts of her small pupils who were guilty of wrong-doing. John Henry, who had been apt to become lost in dreams and miss thereby many points of instruction, had frequently suffered untold tortures when "Skinny," fixing her cold prominent eyes on his own, explained what would happen to him if he chanced to die at the moment. The imagination of John Henry being acute, he had been wont to feel the heat of the flames, and sense the terrible agony of the rack in all his limbs. Children who had no imagination wept bitterly on these occasions, and forgot all about it the next moment. John Henry had never wept, and, likewise, he never forgot. He had suffered.

He dreamt that he had committed some dire offence; that "Skinny" had locked him up in the empty schoolroom; and then he saw that the appearance of the schoolroom had commenced to alter. He wondered what was going to happen, and then he knew. He was in hell, stretched in agony on the rack which "Skinny" had so often described, and the flames were leaping up all around him. The heat was intense. His limbs were stiff and ached con-

sumedly. There was an added torment, too, which "Skinny" had never mentioned. He was not stretched out in the approved and Christian fashion of the monks, but in a horrible attitude of contortion. It was all very real and terrible. John Henry moaned in his sleep and moved feebly. His head hung down towards the flames at an appalling angle, and this worried him more than anything. He made several attempts to raise it, but they were fruitless.

He was in great distress, and then an extraordinary thing happened. Some one lifted up his head, very gently, and rested it on a block of ice. John Henry knew that it was a block of ice because it was so cool, also, after his head had rested there for a second, it commenced to melt. He could feel the moisture on his cheek. Then the same person, in some miraculous fashion, released him from his attitude of contortion, and allowed him to lie on the rack in the normal fashion. It was a great improvement, and he was deeply thankful. He wondered who was befriending him, and then he knew. It was little Betsy Phillips. John Henry had once had a distinct penchant for little Betsy; and she had promised, on many occasions, to come to his aid if "Skinny" actually contrived to send him to everlasting torment.

She was doing so now, and she was so sorry for him that she was sobbing. John Henry could not see her, but he could hear the sound of her sobs, muffled and indistinct, but quite unmistakable. There were even a couple of tears which fell on his cheek. John Henry thought what a terrible thing it would be if the block of ice under his head caused them to freeze there; and the same thought occurred to little Betsy. She bent over him and very softly brushed them away. John Henry wondered what it was that she brushed them away with, and then he knew. It was the little velvet pad that "Skinny" used for polishing her fingernails. John Henry felt quite happy and contented, in spite of his discomfort, as he thought of how much little Betsy was doing for him.

Presently, however, it appeared that she could do no more, for

John Henry knew that she was going to leave him. He was greatly disturbed at the thought, but very quickly he saw that she must go. It was a shame to keep Little Betsy in hell. John Henry made an attempt to tell her this, but his voice refused its office. He struggled to speak, and then he forgot what it was he wished to say. He tried hard to remember, but the flames, while they had not melted the ice, had commenced to make it hot, so that his mind grew confused. He forgot that he was in hell, and commenced to wonder where he was. He made a tremendous effort of memory and awoke; and when John Henry awoke he really did commence to wonder what had happened, and where he was.

He was hot, intolerably hot. His head, in particular, was exceedingly warm. He was dazed, and dazzled, and found it difficult to see anything with clarity. He was in bed, that he knew; but the bed was quite out of the ordinary and seemed to be composed of bars of iron. He lay on his back, his limbs were stiff and ached, his right arm was numb—nerveless, and lay stretched out at an angle from the rest of his body. Memories of his dream remained in the mind of John Henry and tended to heighten his confusion. He stared up at the ceiling and wondered if he had been drinking over-night. He was very tired and drowsy, and the chances are that he would have fallen in a few moments into the depths of sleep, but a sudden and peculiar sound arrested his attention. He pondered profoundly, for a moment, and then he knew what it was. Some one, down below, was trying to play the flute. John Henry awoke completely, with a mind fully alive to his surroundings, and the incidents of the previous night.

The room was full of light, and it was the sun beating down on his head that had caused his dream. He lay where the two beds touched, and it was this which had made him think he rested on bars of iron. He was smothered under an excessive pile of blankets, and it was no wonder, with the added heat of the sun, that he felt hot. He recalled the discomfort of his position,

while Little David slept, and he was not surprised that he felt stiff, that his right arm was numb and almost useless. He turned his head to look at the boy, but the bed was empty.

John Henry sat up. The action caused a thrill of pain to shoot from his wrist to his shoulder, but he paid no attention to that. He gazed all round the room and could see no trace of Little David anywhere. His coat and cap had gone from the chair by the door. The small pair of pyjamas had gone also, and, likewise, the paper in which both pairs had been wrapped up. John Henry sprang out of bed oppressed by a sensation of disaster. He opened the door and listened, but the inn was still and silent. There seemed to be no one stirring. He crossed to the window and pulled up the sash. The position of the sun forced John Henry to the belief that he had overslept himself. He had. It was almost ten o'clock.

He wondered where Little David could be, and then his eyes fell on the bed. He recalled his dream, and he felt assured that the boy had fled. There was no pillow on the other bed. It lay, doubled up, where the two beds met, where, in fact, John Henry's head had rested. It was the block of ice of his dream. He bent down and touching it found that it was damp. Little David must have wakened early, and wept. He recalled the fact that Betsy had been crying in his dream, and he thought of the two tears on his cheek. He thought, also, of the little velvet pad with which Betsy had brushed them away, and he remembered the touch of Little David's lips on the previous night when he had said that he was sorry. John Henry ran his fingers through his hair.

"All the time while I was sleeping like a sodden brute," he groaned, "the poor little fellow must have been trying to make me comfortable. Now he has gone, and the Lord alone knows what will happen to him."

He stood, torn with vexation, and an alteration in the arrangement of his clothes attracted his attention. John Henry was very particular about his clothes, mainly, it is true, because he saw no

chance of ever being able to buy a fresh supply. He invariably folded up each article as he took it off, and piled them one on top of the other. In the natural sequence of events the garments worn next his skin came uppermost. On the present occasion his jacket reposed on the top of the pile, and it was not folded neatly but lay anyhow as if dropped there in a hurry. There was something white on it, too, which puzzled him till he saw that it was a sheet of paper torn from his own pocket-book. John Henry reached the chair in a single bound. It was a note from Little David, and the writing was uncertain and wavered as if the hand of the writer had been shaking. There were a few spots on it, too, and these caused the paper to quiver in John Henry's hand, for they were still a trifle damp.

"Dear big-hearted Brother," read John Henry. "I am going away before you waken because I must, and not because I am ungrateful or afraid of you. I would like to say what I think, but that is not possible. I shall never cease to be grateful for all you have done, and I shall never, never," here there came the largest blot of all—"forget you. You are the"—here a couple of words were scored out heavily—"best friend I shall ever meet, and I am miserable at leaving you without a word. I have borrowed half-a-crown, and shall send it back whenever I can. I have your address on an old envelope I have taken. Please do not be angry with me, and try to think kindly of Little David who will be always thinking of you."

The letter proper ended abruptly at this point, but there was a postscript.

"You must not worry about me. I shall be quite safe and happy. I asked you to go to Tipping Horley because my foster-mother, who is good and kind like yourself, lives in a small village near by. I could not have gone to her last night, for very few trains stop at the station. I have borrowed the half-crown for my ticket."

There was a second postscript, and in this one the writing was

different. It was almost as if Little David had written very rapidly, and without pausing to think.

"I cannot bear the idea of any one else using them, so I am taking them with me."

"That," said John Henry aloud, "refers to the pyjamas." He pondered profoundly, for a moment, picturing the small white figure struggling with the bed, and he frowned. "No one else would have had a chance of using them," he remarked with decision, and then he sighed.

There was a knock, and the door opened. John Henry swung round eagerly, but it was only the melancholy odd man who entered. He held a can of hot water in one hand, a small round bottle in the other, and he seemed to be immersed in an even profounder gloom than on the previous night. He did not look at John Henry, but advanced to the wash-stand where he deposited the small round bottle, removed the ewer, and commenced to polish the basin with a cloth. His actions were slow and deliberate. He stood with his back to John Henry, and as he polished, he spoke.

"Promises are promises. They should not be broken. A man's word is a valuation of himself—unless he is in business when it has no meaning till it is written, signed, sealed, and legally attested—and if he breaks it, that is his own loss; but there is no harm in playing the flute. If I care to play the flute of a morning after having been up all night," said the odd man fiercely, apparently addressing the wall, "who is going to stop me?"

John Henry, having no ideas on the subject, remained silent.

"I hate the instrument," continued the odd man darkly. "As for the Flute himself, I tripped him up last night as he was stumbling out at the door, not once, or twice, but three times. I did that and felt better after it too. He must have dropped the thing, for it was lying on the door-step. I kept it, and very useful it has been as you must admit."

"I fail to see how it has been useful," said John Henry, "and

why you should play an instrument you abhor, beats me altogether."

The matter of the flute failed to interest him. He wanted to ask the boots if he had seen anything of Little David, but he restrained himself, for there was no saying what the boy might have said, or done, on leaving the inn. He might have slipped away early and unperceived, or he might have been seen and given some valid reason for his solitary departure. John Henry commenced to read the letter for the second time, and he entirely forgot about the odd man as he did so, and this, being quite characteristic of John Henry, was not to be wondered at.

The odd man turned round and gazed at him with interest, and, it seemed, with some small pleasure to himself; but when John Henry glanced up from the letter, his one eye appeared to be fixed on the opposite end of the room, and his other eye, well, that one appeared to be looking out of the window. It was very odd and rather disconcerting.

"Your little brother," said the odd man, speaking slowly and with great distinctness, "told me you were tired and must not be disturbed. He made me promise not to waken you. That was where the flute came in useful. The moment I heard you moving about, I stopped playing, and here I am."

As he said this the odd man removed his jacket, and, rolling back the sleeves of his shirt, picked up the small round bottle; and as he did all this with an air of fierce determination, it was a trifle startling.

"Excuse me," said John Henry in some alarm, "what are you going to do with that bottle?"

The odd man, making no reply, withdrew the cork, and, pouring a little of the contents in the palm of one hand, commenced to smear both hands with the stuff. He spoke, too, in a low, fierce undertone.

"There are some people I would throttle off-hand and never regret it. There are others I would not lift a finger to help if they were gasping in agony; and the majority I would not look on

as anything but so many things to be filled with beer, or so many boots and shoes to be cleaned. You are different. I'm going to rub your arm. It will hurt, but the stiffness will be gone in an hour. This stuff is good for both man and beast."

Having anointed both hands to his satisfaction, the odd man advanced on John Henry, and, without further preamble, took possession of his right arm. John Henry was too much astonished to protest. He submitted like a lamb, but, perhaps, the fact of his detecting in the face of the odd man that something which had pleased him on the previous night, had a little to do with this. As John Henry remained silent, it is hard to tell.

"I knew your arm would be stiff," said the odd man, "because your little brother told me you had strained it. He did not tell me how you managed to do so. Indeed he said little or nothing except that he had to go, and that you were weary and wanted to sleep. I asked no questions. I never do ask questions. If the answers are worth listening to, the questions do not require to be asked. That's my experience. You can see them—the answers, I mean. Your little brother had been crying. He was not so scared as he was last night, but he was very miserable. He refused to eat anything, and he only asked one question."

"What was that?" inquired John Henry.

"The shortest way to the station," said the odd man. "Steady, sir, steady! You must let me finish with your arm. No good rushing about the country searching for somebody with a stiff arm as a handicap. That would be foolish."

"He is not my brother," said John Henry after a moment. "Indeed I do not know who or what he is, except that he is in trouble. I must find out if he is safe or not. It worries me to think of the poor little creature wandering about like a lost soul."

"I can well believe it," said the odd man, "and I knew he was not your brother the moment I set eyes on him. I thought at first—but it does not matter what I thought. I know now, and that's better than thinking."

"What do you know?" asked John Henry.

"That you are likely to give to others what I stopped searching for, years ago," said the odd man gruffly.

"What is that?" asked John Henry.

"Happiness!" said the odd man shortly.

John Henry was astounded, and quite at a loss to know what to say in reply to this utterance. The face of the odd man was wooden in expression, and this complicated the matter. He was pondering a suitable answer when a shrill, peevish voice commenced to call for the odd man in tones of annoyance. That gentleman, giving no sign that he heard, went on with the task of rubbing John Henry's arm with assiduity and deliberation. The voice, growing shriller and more peevish, also went on till John Henry could stand it no longer.

"I think," he said diffidently, "that some one is calling you!"

"It's a habit they have," said the odd man. "Nothing on earth will stop them. They call for me all day long. If a child were born in this inn, it would be shouting 'Here you!' in the inside of the first ten minutes. Pay no attention. She will soon grow weary."

The voice became a positive shriek of annoyance.

"Really," said John Henry, "you must go. Perhaps the lady is in trouble!"

"She is," said the odd man, and he smiled darkly. "That's the missus, and the master's mouth is hot and dry like a lime-kiln. The Tippling Howling Maniacs were too much for him last night, although he managed to creep up the stairs, giving me a fresh order on each step."

"Please go," said John Henry. "My arm feels splendid. See, I can move it now without pain. I am exceedingly grateful and appreciate what you have done, but you must not neglect other people on my account. That would never do."

The odd man seemed about to make an angry reply, but he changed his mind.

"All right," he said, "I'll go at once," and he went, closing the door gently behind him.

"There now," thought John Henry with vexation, "I've offended him, and I had no wish to do that. I *am* a fool!"

He turned towards the wash-stand, and the sight of his reflection made him shudder.

"Heavens!" said John Henry, blushing hotly. "What an appalling spectacle, like a figure from a madman's pantomime!"

He divested himself hurriedly of the objectionable pyjamas.

"Heavens!" said John Henry for the second time, pausing with his shirt in one hand. "The odd man did not laugh at me. He did not even smile! He must think me an ungrateful beast!"

The thought hurried his dressing, a matter of difficulty with an arm still a trifle stiff and painful, but, eventually, he succeeded, and, leaving the pyjamas in a heap on the floor, he passed down the stairs. The odd man, appearing suddenly from a dark lair which looked like an overgrown cupbroad, beckoned him into a small, cosy room where a fire was burning brightly, and a table stood set out in appetising fashion for one.

"Everything in order," said the odd man, looking anywhere but at John Henry. "Eggs, cold ham, and other trifles, all waiting to be eaten. Chair by the fire waiting to be sat on. Sit down, sir, and eat!"

The odd man made a pretence of dusting the chair in question, and drew it back from the table inviting John Henry to be seated; but John Henry did not sit down. He crossed to the odd man and touched his arm, clasping it gently with his fingers.

"You know," he said, "I am quite unable to express my thanks for all your kindness. It is—" but what it was, I cannot tell, for at this point the odd man, who had commenced to show signs of impatience, cut him short.

"It is not," he said with emphasis. "It is nothing of the kind. I never try to please any one but myself. What have I brought you in here for? Why, just to spite the master and missus! This

is their special room, and their special cups and saucers, and their special breakfast. They will not be down for a couple of hours, and they will be none the wiser. I shall listen to them boasting that no guest ever ate in this room, and that will please me, for I will know it is a lie!"

John Henry remained silent and he watched the face of the odd man with attention. That gentleman, having freed himself from John Henry's grasp, commenced to move all the articles on the table as if their order and appearance disturbed him. He gained the opposite side of the room, during these manœuvres, and he glanced at the door as if he wished to go away, but this he seemed unable to do.

"You are a good fellow," said John Henry slowly. "You—" He paused as the shrill voice of the landlady arose, calling in tones of anger. The odd man sighed, as a liberated person might sigh, with relief. He made for the door, disappeared like a streak of light, but his head reappeared, in a second, and there was the ghost of a grin on his face.

"I never thought to welcome the sound of *her* voice," he said. "I hope you enjoy your breakfast, sir!"

John Henry did do so. In fact I have since heard him say that, of all the meals he ever sat down to, it was the most enjoyable. This was due—according to John Henry—to the sauce; but when I asked him what particular brand of sauce it was, he merely said—"A kind you cannot buy." A most surprising and unsatisfactory statement, and one that must be false, for, if you cannot buy this particular brand of sauce, of what value can it possibly be—of none assuredly!

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID DISAPPEARS

(continued)

JOHN HENRY spent half an hour searching for the odd man, but he failed to find him. He had disappeared. He was in the habit of disappearing, according to the stout lady who presided over the office. She went a step further than this and affirmed, in no uncertain voice, that the odd man had a special genius for never being about when he was wanted. Without entering into any discussion on the subject John Henry entrusted her with a message and a tip, and leaving the Black Bull, sought the station. There an exceedingly ancient and crusty-looking porter, who was engaged in piling a number of heavy packing-cases on the edge of the platform, paused in his task, glared balefully at him for a second, and then deliberately disregarded his existence.

The packing-cases lay outside the station. John Henry, pondering the difficulty of finding out where Little David had gone, watched the old man hoist them one by one on a truck, run the truck along, and then turn them out. The idea of asking the porter did not appeal to him because that gentleman's appearance was not conducive to indiscriminate questioning. There was no one else about, however, so he approached the old man and coughed. It was not an easy subject to broach. Words came easily to John Henry, nevertheless, although they had no direct bearing on the subject in his mind.

"My doctor," he said with assurance, "makes me take a certain amount of exercise each day—to strengthen the muscles of my

back. If you would allow me to lift these cases on the truck, it would be a kind action on your part."

The remaining cases were the largest and heaviest, and John Henry had caught the sound of a laboured breathing distressing to hear.

"I'm not an old man, and I'm strong—strong as a horse," said the porter defiantly, but he gave place to John Henry and contented himself with running the truck along and tipping out the cases. They worked in silence till but one case remained, and then the porter spoke.

"My wife's sister is at the bottom of this," he said, and he tapped the case with his hand, nodded, and scowled.

John Henry was startled. The remark was unexpected, and the expression of the old man was quite in keeping with a literal translation of his words.

"Bless my soul!" he said. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Yes!" said the porter, scowling more than ever. "She and her brats are at the bottom of it. I would be living at ease on my savings if it were not for them. If a man dies and leaves his brats—one of them ailing too—and a wife with no money to support them, they should be allowed to starve. That's what I say, and feel too!"

John Henry looked attentively at the lined face before him, and he saw that the porter's other hand rested on the small of his back.

"I understand," he said quietly. "You work off all your weariness and bitterness on the passengers, and then you go home with a smile and make it easy for them there. You need not trouble to contradict me, for I am not blind. I can see it on your face."

The porter, who had opened his mouth in indignant denial, was silent for a time, then he spoke, and his words astonished John Henry.

"I knew who you were the moment I set eyes on you, but I did not believe that lying rascal, so I waited to see what you would do.

The train is due in three minutes, so you had better buy a ticket. Crompton is your station—at least that is where the boy booked to, so I expect he went there.”

“But—!” commenced John Henry in astonishment.

“The odd man from the Black Bull,” said the porter, and propelled John Henry towards the booking office. “A lying, lazy rascal if ever there was one, but he has spoken the truth for once. You must hurry up.”

John Henry did hurry up. He found himself in the train, bound for Crompton, in the inside of a few moments; and he leant out of the window with a view to thanking the porter, but it was that worthy who took the word.

“Good luck, sir,” he said. “I hope you will be satisfied with what you find!”

“I wonder what he meant by that,” muttered John Henry, but he did not wonder for long. He was filled with a pleasurable sense of having accomplished a difficult task; and, strangely enough, did not doubt that the location of Little David at Crompton would prove easy. He sat and thought about the odd man, and the porter, and Little David; and the trend of his thoughts made him smile happily. John Henry was a very foolish man, and one who took pleasure out of trifles that other people either disregard or fail to see altogether. He was evolving a complicated scheme by the operation of which Little David, the odd man, and the porter, all benefited, when the train stopped at Crompton. He was still deep in the scheme as he strode down the one street of the village, and it was not till he had gained the outskirts of the little place that he came back to earth with a start, and a realization of the difficulties of his position.

He had visualized, from Little David’s note, an ample, deep-bosomed, cheery-faced woman, and he had determined to find her. To do this had seemed an easy matter in the Black Bull, for he had decided that she would be well known; but, standing in Crompton itself, the matter became complicated.

"How can I," muttered John Henry, "ask for such a woman who was foster-mother to a boy called Little David?"

"You are a fool," said John Henry to himself with a fitting solemnity.

He paused by the side of the road, uncertain what to do next, and his eyes scanned a cottage which stood close by. It was small, fresh, and there was a garden before it full of flowers. John Henry walked on a few steps and stood by the gate staring up the path. The cottage was, he decided, a fitting spot for his motherly party to live in. He had scarcely come to this conclusion when a figure appeared in the open doorway, looked at him with disfavour, and came slowly down the path.

It was a stout, red-cheeked, ample woman in the prime of life. The sleeves of her print dress were rolled up past the elbow. She exuded a faint and wholesome odour of soap, and looked, taken altogether, like an embodiment of the spirit of home bent on a wholesale extermination of dirt and disorder. John Henry experienced the sensations of an objectionable microbe as she came towards him with obvious hostility, a frown on her face, and her hands resting on her ample hips.

"Might I ask what you are staring at *my* cottage for?" she inquired fiercely.

John Henry grew red, and stammered, and was unable to speak.

"I'm waiting!" advised the ample lady grimly.

John Henry's eyes travelled over her figure and rested on her face. He imagined that he saw the suspicion of a smile in the depths of her eyes, and this gave him courage.

"I am looking for a kind, motherly woman who was foster-mother to a boy called Little David," he said. "She lives in this village and I want to see her to make sure that the boy is safe and well. He is a slim little fellow with a big head, and very small feet and hands. A pretty little chap who has been in trouble and who wants to be looked after, and mothered, and sent back to his father. I do not know this woman's name, or where her house is,

and I would be very much obliged if you could help me to find her."

"You expect me to believe that you have come here to look for a woman whose name you do not know, and who may not even exist!" scoffed the ample lady.

"I do," said John Henry. He hesitated, for a second, and then went on with confidence. "In fact I am inclined to think that you are the woman yourself. You must be. That is why you came out of the cottage to speak to me."

The ample lady snorted.

"I came out because I am a decent woman and object to men loitering at my gate," she said, but she did not deny John Henry's suggestion, and the twinkle in her eyes became plainly evident.

"Has Little David come to you?" asked John Henry eagerly. "He left a note behind to that effect, but he went away while I was asleep. If he is here, I want to see him."

"Little David *did* come to me," said the ample lady shortly, "but you cannot see him, for I sent him packing at once. You will never see him again. There is no reason why you should."

"Where is he? What have you done with him?" demanded John Henry. "Tell me! I must know!"

The ample lady crossed her arms with deliberation and leant on the gate. Her attitude was, like her expression, decidedly hostile.

"What business is it of yours?" she asked. "What right have you to come here and demand to see the boy? He is nothing to you!"

John Henry became vastly indignant.

"Nothing to me!" he repeated. "Do you think I am a stone! I spent yesterday evening and all night in his company. He was scared, and helpless, and thoroughly unnerved. If you imagine that I can have a quivering little piece of humanity like that in my charge, trusting me absolutely, and then dismiss him from my

mind you are greatly mistaken. I cannot rest till I know that he is safe!"

The hostility of the ample lady lessened a trifle.

"Then you can start resting at once," she said, "for he is quite safe. I have sent him to his own people who live some miles from here. They happened to be in the village when he arrived. There is no reason why you should worry about him."

"Will they treat him well?" demanded John Henry. "He had done something foolish—run away perhaps, and was afraid to go home."

"They will treat him just as they did before," said the ample lady, "for they will think that he has been with me all the time. You can take my word for it that he will not suffer."

John Henry was mollified. He recovered from his indignation and smiled at the ample lady, but her features remained impassive.

"I am glad to hear that," he said. "I could not imagine you allowing Little David to suffer. It would hurt you just as much as it would hurt him—more perhaps. You are his foster-mother?"

"I am," said the ample lady shortly, "and I am not. Depends on the way you look at it."

"I prefer to imagine that you are," said John Henry. He produced his pocket-book, tore out a leaf, and wrote upon it. "This is my name and address," he explained. "I would be very grateful if you would drop me a line just to say that the boy is all right, and has recovered from his fright. I shall not be able to keep from thinking about him, you know, and it would be kind on your part."

The ample lady accepted the paper and read the writing thereon, then she looked at John Henry with a growing curiosity which appeared to be mixed with some other emotion, such as mirth, or pity, or even contempt. She was still a trifle hostile but her hostility seemed to be receding into the background—as if it were no longer required.

"You have asked me a lot of questions," she said, "so now I am

going to ask you a few. Have you no people that you can come dancing into the country at a moment's notice? What about your wife and children?"

"I have no wife," said John Henry with dignity, "but if I had she would not, I hope, object to my befriending a boy like Little David."

"You think that, do you!" interrupted the ample lady. "Well, well, but go on!"

"I have people, naturally," continued John Henry, "but not in London. They live in the provinces. Of course there is Veronica—that reminds me, I wonder if Veronica remembered to feed her?"

"Who is Veronica, and what has she to feed?"

"Veronica is a friend of mine, a very good friend," said John Henry. "She limps a trifle, has a habit of dropping everything, but she is very kind to me. She keeps my room clean and feeds Agnes when I forget. Agnes," explained John Henry, hurriedly, as the mouth of the ample lady opened, "is my cat, and Veronica is Mrs. Baldwin's—my landlady—servant. She was a foundling, poor soul, and they work her to death."

"You don't happen to have a parrot, or a monkey, or a few tame mice?" asked the ample lady with sarcasm.

"No," said John Henry simply, "I have not, although I once had a dog. It was a stray, but it died."

The ample lady looked up the road, then down the road, then she looked back at the cottage, and last of all she looked at John Henry. It was almost as if she expected him to have vanished by the time she had completed her survey. Since he had not, she prosecuted her inquiry.

"What are you?" she asked. "Have you no business to attend to—" She paused, stricken dumb by the expression of horror on John Henry's face.

"I have," said John Henry. "I had forgotten all about it. What a dreadful thing! I have an appointment at half past three this afternoon which I must keep. Whatever shall I do!"

"Take a train and keep it," advised the ample lady who was of a practical turn of mind. "There is one due about now—a fast train that will take you up to town in plenty of time, but if you miss it you will miss your appointment also. You had better hurry. You have no time to spare."

"I shall run," said John Henry. "Please let me hear about Little David, and, the next time he comes your way, say that I shall never forget him. If I can ever do anything for him, I shall be only too pleased. I should like to see him again, but not if he does not want to see me," and having said this, John Henry removed his hat, bowed, and commenced to run back towards the station.

He had not taken a dozen steps, however, when the voice of the ample lady called him back. She had emerged from the gate and stood in the street, and her expression was curious. She appeared to be attempting to look severe, and at the same time to be doing her best to keep down a laugh. There was something else in her face, too, and this John Henry could not fathom, for it appeared to be composed of astonishment and pity.

"You are very clever!" she said tentatively. "You guessed who I was the moment you saw me, and you took my description from the boy's note. That was smart, very smart. You *are* very clever, are you not?"

"I do not think so," said John Henry, slightly taken aback.

"Your young woman must have a terrible time," pursued the ample lady. "You have only to look at her and then you know everything she has ever been, or done, or thought to do. Does she wear a mask when you go to see her?"

"Really," said John Henry, "I must go. I shall miss the train. I have no woman, young or otherwise, in my life, and why you should make such extraordinary statements I fail to fathom."

"One moment," said the ample lady. "You are young and can run hard. Tell me this now—you *are* very clever, are you not? You never miss anything?"

John Henry, thoroughly bewildered, made no response. He

turned on his heel and fled down the road, and as he went the voice of the ample lady followed him, and her words sounded like an accusation—a triumphant accusation.

“You *are* very clever, are you not?” she shouted.

“I may be very clever,” thought John Henry as he entered the station, “but I shall feel remarkably foolish if I cannot get up to London in time.”

He was saved from this, however, for the train deposited him in Paddington station as the clocks were striking two.

CHAPTER VI

THE THREE MIGHTY BEINGS OF MEAD HOUSE, SOHO

It is with very mixed feelings that I commence this chapter. The task, let me say at once, is beyond my powers. To describe John Henry, or Little David, or indeed any other simple and ordinary creature is easy, but how to approach the subject of the Three Mighty Beings of Mead House, Soho, beats me altogether. To describe them as men, naturally, would not be difficult and this I shall do later on; but, alas, they are not men at this point in the tale, they are—I scarcely dare write the word—PUBLISHERS! Now when you know what they are you will appreciate my difficulty. A publisher is a wonderful thing. He is quite apart from anything human. He is difficult to imagine, and, frequently, exceedingly difficult to find or see. He is, in truth—but if you know nothing about them then I had better not tell you, for fear you might drop your occupation and spend the rest of your life in a vain search; and if you do, then there is no need for me to write a single word—no, not one.

I can, however, describe the setting in which these mighty creatures sit; but, first of all, I must describe how they come into the life of so ordinary a person as John Henry Millman. John Henry had committed a serious indiscretion. He had written a novel. Not that there is anything unusual or serious about that, but his subsequent actions altered the aspect of the matter. John Henry had written several novels previous to this, but he had treated them in the proper spirit. They had been destroyed, at once, and without compunction. This one, sad to relate, he had treated differently. He had found out that he could not destroy it, and the discovery

disturbed him because he did not know what to do with it. It was very annoying.

He hid the manuscript away under a pile of odd papers and pretended that it was not there—but it was no good. The manuscript refused to be disregarded. Matters came to such a pitch that John Henry found he could not remain in the same room with the thing, and as he only had one room, this was exceedingly irksome. He went out one afternoon, to escape from its baleful influence, and, driven to desperation, took a ticket for the entire journey of a bus, an unwise action that deprived him of supper. John Henry never had any money.

Charing Cross Road was what is commonly known as “up”—that is to say it was occupied by a number of muscular gentlemen smoking pipes to the intense gratification of an immense and respectful crowd. The bus, with John Henry on the top, was diverted from its normal route. It dashed happily into Soho in the company of a number of other vehicles, and stopped, in a jam of traffic, directly before the front of Mead House. John Henry was on a level with the windows of a large, handsome room on the first floor, and he gazed inside without any definite object.

The room was expensively furnished in a heavy, impressive fashion. There was a huge desk by the window, which appeared to be one desk in three, or three desks in one, for there was accommodation for three people to sit there. Three comfortable yet austere swivel chairs stood on three sides of the desk, one with its back to the window, and one at either end. There was only one other chair in the room, and it stood by itself, in the middle of the floor, placed so that any one seated there would face the huge desk, not directly, but at a sharp angle. This chair was very large, and very low, and it also appeared to be very comfortable; but there was something sinister about it which John Henry disliked. Looking at it his mind went back to “Skinny” Purvis and her tales about the thumbscrew and the rack; and he imagined a quivering victim seated there listening to the verdict of a stern

judge who sat in the middle chair, staring straight before him, and thus avoiding a direct scrutiny of the victim's face.

He thought of this so vividly that it grew unpleasant, and he transferred his gaze to the other objects in the room. There were several huge bookcases, a number of pictures on the walls, a collection of chaste ornaments on the mantelshelf, and a large but restrained-looking fire burning in the open grate. John Henry was interested. The room affected him as a Royal Apartment might—with a sense of his own utter inadequacy. He wondered what manner of creature might work there, for there was no one to be seen, and at that moment a voice commenced to speak behind him, and he found out.

"That is Canning and Canning, the publishers," said the voice. "The richest firm in London.. There is a Canning left, but he keeps in the background. The business is ostensibly conducted by the two junior partners, Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds."

"What do they publish?" inquired a second voice.

"Anything that has a name attached to it," said the first voice, "and little else. An unknown author might as well—" but what an unknown author might as well do, John Henry never found out, for the bus started to move at the moment, and the words were lost in the roaring of the traffic.

John Henry left the bus in Shaftesbury Avenue, much to the astonishment of the conductor who knew that he had paid for the entire run, and it was not till the bus had moved on that he recalled this fact. He looked upon the matter in a philosophical light, however, for it was easier to walk home from Shaftesbury Avenue than from the far distant point to which the bus was bound. As he had no money, walking was a necessity. He had got off because he wished to see the speakers behind him. To have glanced over his shoulder would, no doubt, have been a simpler method of doing this; but that also did not occur to him till afterwards. There were quite a number of things of a like nature that did not occur to John Henry till long afterwards.

He walked home and the exercise sharpened his appetite. He recalled the money spent on the bus with bitterness and realized that the loss lay at the door of his wretched manuscript. He reached his own room, tired and exasperated, and the influence of the thing prevented him from resting. The words of the man on the bus recurred to his mind.

"An unknown author might as well——"

"Tear up his manuscript as take it to them," completed John Henry aloud. "Well, why not take it to them since I cannot bring myself to tear it up?"

He hesitated and was lost. He seized the manuscript, tied it up, and leaving the house, walked rapidly from Paddington to Soho with the bundle under his arm. The entrance to Mead House startled and awed him. He crept up the stairs, purposely avoiding the lift, and insinuated himself through a door marked "Canning and Canning—General Offices." There, a pert young woman, very smart and rather pretty, after disregarding him for about ten minutes, suddenly awoke to his presence and demanded his business. John Henry, who had commenced to evolve a theory based on the shape of her left ear—it was pretty, by the way—became vastly confused.

"I have brought this," he said, and he held out the bundle.

The young woman retreated as if from a viper.

"Why have you brought it here?" she demanded.

John Henry, being unable to explain that he desired to get rid of the thing, became lost in a still deeper confusion.

"Hurry up!" said the young woman with a toss of her head. "I am busy and have no time to waste."

"I have brought it from Paddington for Mr. Canning," said John Henry, speaking at random, with the one thought of escape looming large in his mind.

The attitude of the pert young thing altered immediately. She became docile and winning. She looked as if she would have liked to smile at John Henry, but would not dare to do so. John Henry,

astounded, wondered what he had said to work this miracle. She accepted the bundle and addressed him with respectful solicitude.

"Very good, sir, that will be all right. Did you wish to see Mr. Sinclair or Mr. Dodds?"

"Certainly not!" said John Henry in alarm, and he made for the door.

"What is your name, sir?" inquired the no longer pert one.

"John Henry Millman," said John Henry, uttering his name with a sensation of relief. That he knew and was certain of.

In the passage John Henry bumped into two tall, thin men. He stood on one side to let them pass and they favoured him with a searching scrutiny under which he wilted. It was Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds, but of this John Henry did not think. He did not even think about them at all, which shows how easily the great things in life may be disregarded. Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds thought about him, however, but it was the action of the pert young thing in the office that brought this to pass.

"A gentleman brought this parcel from Mr. Canning at Paddington," she said, indicating John Henry's manuscript. "He was in a hurry and left no other message. I expect Mr. Canning has been in town, but had not time to call himself."

"You had better look into this, Mr. Dodds," said Ralph Seymour. "It must be something uncommon for Mr. Canning to trouble about it. He unwrapped the parcel and discovered John Henry's name on the cover. 'What was the name of the gentleman who called?'"

The pert young thing repeated John Henry's name, with a little information on his appearance, and added the fact that he had just left.

"Undoubtedly the man we met in the passage," said Ralph Seymour. "I thought there was something uncommon about him. Mr. Canning must know him personally! You must give this manuscript most careful and immediate consideration, Mr. Dodds."

"The moment I saw the man, I thought to myself—'What have

we here!" " said Sinclair Dodds in a species of muted ecstasy. "I shall go into this to-night. Tie it up, Miss Wrenlet; I shall take it home with me."

I wish to say at this point that there was something in John Henry's book, something beyond the written words of the story, but neither Ralph Seymour nor Sinclair Dodds would have seen this if they had not thought that their much-feared and seldom-seen senior partner had previously made the discovery. John Henry never knew what he owed to the pert young thing in the office, and she never doubted that he came direct from Philip Canning who ruled her destiny, and who lived some thirty miles out of London from Paddington station. To the world that came into the offices of Canning and Canning, Philip Canning was unknown, for he was seldom there; but he ruled the place for all that. When he received a long letter from his two partners complimenting him on his "find" in the matter of John Henry Millman he was astonished; but being a wise man he enjoyed the credit and kept a still tongue in his head. He was sufficiently curious, however, to be present on the day when John Henry was invited to call at Mead House at half past three in the afternoon.

From this you will gather that John Henry came to be mixed up with these wonderful creatures through pure chance and not by any action on their part, and so I feel easier in my mind. I know that you would never credit a bald statement that they had wished to have anything to do with him on his own account. That would be absurd and altogether unthinkable, and if you do not agree with me then you have failed to grasp their exceptional attributes—but as you read on you will understand.

At five and twenty minutes past three on the momentous afternoon the three partners of Canning and Canning sat in majesty at their huge desk, each in his appointed place. Philip Canning sat with his back to the window, Ralph Seymour sat on his right hand, and facing him sat Sinclair Dodds. The two latter gentle-

men appeared to be immersed in piles of correspondence that seemed endless. They worked. Philip Canning sat back in his chair, with John Henry's manuscript before him, and thought. An air of silent grandeur pervaded the room. You might think that it is impossible to conceive a more impressive spectacle—you are wrong. You do these mighty beings an injustice by so thinking—wait!

Three telephones stood on the desk, one ready to the hand of each of the seated trio. A row of bell-pushes showed beside each instrument. Each of these bells when rung carried a different message to the outer office where their note was listened for with attention. The messages varied from—"Announce that the building is on fire" to—"Announce that the Prime Minister has called for a friendly chat." They were all "Announces" and they were exceedingly useful. Undesirable authors were got rid of by this means with ease and celerity. Desirable authors were chained to the firm in bonds of worshipping respect. High spirited authors were reduced to grovelling idiots—all kinds and conditions of authors were catered for with sense, kindly foresight, and discrimination.

Three bell-pushes stood concealed under the desk, one ready to the right foot of each occupier of a chair. The messages they carried to the outer office were two in number. They were: one ring—"Call me on the telephone at once"; two rings—"Enter, apologise, and say that I am wanted outside on urgent business." In the middle of the mantel-shelf stood a small bronze figure holding up a tiny lantern in which an electric bulb lay concealed. At twenty-eight minutes past three Philip Canning's eyes became fixed on this figure. At twenty-eight and a half minutes past three the bulb glowed into a point of light. A change came over the entire aspect of the room. Before it had been impressive, now it was more than impressive. Words cannot convey it. It is impossible to describe.

"He has arrived," said Philip Canning, and he stiffened and

appeared to stretch and grow taller in his chair. He was, at any time, exceedingly tall and exceedingly thin.

"Has arrived," repeated Ralph Seymour, abandoning his work, and he also grew taller. He was, at any time, very tall and very thin.

"Arrived," breathed Sinclair Dodds, doing likewise, and likewise increasing in stature. He was, at any time, tall and thin.

There was a ghastly silence during which the three figures became vested with a super-human dignity. The last lingering remnants of humanity could almost be seen dropping from them. The serene calm of their expressions was awe-inspiring. Twenty minutes passed, and then Philip Canning broke the silence.

"The chair, has it been screwed to the floor?"

"I have seen to it myself," said Ralph Seymour.

"Myself," breathed Sinclair Dodds.

"Please press your number six, Mr. Seymour!"

"My number six," said Ralph Seymour, suiting the action to the word.

"Six," breathed Sinclair Dodds.

The message which this bell carried to the outer office was: "Announce the gentlemen—with respect."

John Henry entered the room, and with his entry I heave a sigh of relief, for he outlined the interview to me and I can follow his description. John Henry, as I have said, entered the room, and his nerves, already strained by waiting, became hopelessly disturbed at the sight of three excessively tall, thin figures, outlined against the window, rising to immense heights, and swaying slightly towards him with hands resting on the desk.

"Mr. John Henry Millman—welcome," boomed the tallest, thinnest, and middle figure.

"Mr. Millman—welcome," repeated the taller figure on one side.

"Welcome," echoed the tall figure on the other.

John Henry bowed, wished he could do something with his hands, and experienced an overwhelming desire to flee.

"Pray be seated," boomed the tallest figure, indicating the one chair in the middle of the floor.

"Be seated," repeated the taller figure on one side.

"Seated," echoed the taller figure on the other.

John Henry sat down, and the chair, which was large and comfortable, seemed to rise up and envelop him so that he felt as if it were sitting on him rather than he sitting in it. The angle at which the chair was set disturbed him horribly. He found that to face the three figures who still remained standing, it was necessary to contort himself into an impossible angle. If he did not do this he had to slew his head round—a disconcerting process. He attempted to move the chair, but in this he failed.

"Aa-ha!" boomed the tallest figure, and sitting down, rested its elbows on the desk, the tips of its fingers one against the other, and its eyes gazed directly ahead, and not at John Henry.

"Aa-ha!" repeated the taller figure on the one side, and sitting down rested its elbows on the desk, the tips of its fingers one against the other, and its eyes gazed directly ahead.

"Aa-ha!" echoed the tall figure on the other, and did likewise.

There was a period of silence and then the tallest figure hurled an accusation at John Henry.

"This is your work, Mr. Millman!"

John Henry, wishing that he could say otherwise, admitted that it was.

"I have read it," continued the tallest figure. "Mr. Seymour has read it. Mr. Dodds has read it. We have all read it!"

He paused and John Henry just managed to stop himself from apologizing.

"We have considered the matter and our minds are made up, but, first of all, we wish to emphasize a few points."

John Henry moved unhappily, but remained silent.

"You are young!"

"I shall do my best to rectify it—immediately," said John Henry, with no thought of being rude but simply from nervous strain.

There was a moment of terrible silence. Then the tallest figure spoke in an awful voice.

"Mr. Seymour, have the goodness to carry on! Mr. Dodds, you will please help Mr. Seymour!"

They carried on. According to John Henry they carried on for several hours, but this, I think, is a misstatement. What appears to be true is that from the first letter to the last word there was nothing right in poor John Henry's book. The title was bad to commence with. The opening lines were heavy, the middle uninteresting, the end unconvincing. The characters who were not too young were too old. The men should have been women. It was all wrong. John Henry sunk lower and lower into an abyss of despair till he touched the very bottom, and when that occurred something happened to him, and he found his voice which had fled in the early part of the interview.

"What you say is no doubt true," he said. "I am sorry to have troubled you. It is as I have thought it out, and my characters have made it so. That cannot be helped. If you give it back to me, I shall take it away at once."

He spoke in all sincerity, and he commenced to rise from his chair. He commenced, I say, but he got no further for, happening to glance at the tallest figure, he perceived a dreadful alteration taking place in its face. The eyes continued to stare at a point away from John Henry, but the mouth had commenced to twist into a curious contortion. John Henry, glancing at the other two figures, perceived that their faces were likewise undergoing the same terrible change. When the change appeared to be complete the three heads turned in John Henry's direction and the eyes looked at him. John Henry collapsed into his chair and shuddered, and he might well do so. It was the first time that he had seen a publisher's smile.

You may think that there is nothing out of the common in that, but there is. A publisher's smile is one of the extraordinary things on earth. It is quite inhuman. It either comes direct from an

expectation of a large circulation, or from a certainty of a favourable agreement, or, possibly, from both. It was both in the case of John Henry and the sight was almost more than he could bear. He has since assured me that if it had lasted for an extra six seconds he would have fled. As it was, I saw him a week afterwards, and he was still in a state of prostration.

This being the case I am unable to describe the rest of the interview with clarity. Apparently the tallest figure announced its intention of publishing John Henry's book forthwith, and the other two figures joined in the chorus. Also, by some miraculous means, these wonderful creatures arrived at the conclusion before John Henry left the room, that all the objections to the book had been uttered by John Henry and not by themselves. Then John Henry promised to call on a certain date to sign an agreement; and the terms of this agreement had been explained to, and approved of, by him; and he knew nothing about them and thought less. Apparently all this happened, but John Henry's description was so confused that I found it hard to follow. There was just one point on which he was quite clear. He was so unnerved by the Three Mighty Beings shaking him warmly by the hand that he left the office in a hurry, and he left his hat in the office. He walked all the way home—from necessity, and his hat had arrived there before him. It was the only hat he possessed, and it would have been more than unfortunate if he had lost it.

There was another reason why John Henry did not wish to lose that hat.

A collection of pawn-tickets reposed inside the lining.

Now I do not wish to detract from the qualities of the Three Mighty Beings of Mead House, Soho. That would be a dastardly action. Still I must disclose a fact of some importance to John Henry. When he called to sign the contract for the publishing of his book, he was agreeably surprised to receive a—to him—substantial sum of money as an advance against royalties. He could not recall any mention of this in the previous interview,

and, in truth, it had not been mentioned. I do not mean to suggest that the Three Mighty Beings had examined John Henry's hat—such an action would be beneath their dignity. I prefer to think that their all-seeing eyes had penetrated through the felt. In any case I feel assured that the presence of the pawn-tickets was not unknown to them.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID PEEPS OVER THE HORIZON

I HAVE a great regard for the red-cheeked, ample lady who lived in the little cottage on the outskirts of Crompton, and so—if you have no objection—we will return to where she was left, standing in the middle of the road, staring at John Henry Millman. She continued to stare for some little time after he had disappeared, and she appeared to be both amused and puzzled. She also appeared to be indignant, but not with John Henry.

“Of all the queer things!” she remarked, as she entered her gate, but to what she referred it is impossible to tell, for she made no further statement, but left it at that.

In her kitchen—it was small, and cheery, and clean as a new pin—seated before the fire with a high and becoming colour in her cheeks, a somewhat apprehensive expression in her eyes, and a much too large print dress wrapped round her slender form, was one Mabel Canning, foster-child to the ample lady, the darling of her heart, and, likewise, the daughter of Philip Canning, of Canning and Canning, of publishing and business fame.

The ample lady—her name was Mrs. Bluebell, by the way, although Mabel Canning invariably referred to her as Fammy, a childish contraction of foster-mammy—paused on the threshold of the room, and, resting her hands on her hips, regarded her foster-child with severity and indignation. That young person—she was on the borders of twenty and she looked about sixteen—gave unmistakable signs of being ill at ease. Her colour heightened. She did strange and unnecessary things with her hands. She shifted on her seat much as she might do if seated on a tin-tack

and desirous of concealing the fact. Her expression was peculiar. It seemed to arise from a guilty innocent conscience—if such a thing can be imagined. She appeared to be partly ashamed; her eyes were fresh and unclouded; and they met the gaze of Fammy without flinching.

On a chair by the window lay the remnants of Little David. That is to say, the overcoat, jacket, trousers, and cap of that young person reposed there in a disconsolate heap.

John Henry had thought Little David eminently attractive and exceedingly appealing, and there is no reason to doubt that his opinion of Mabel Canning would have been the same. She was not beautiful. She had no pretensions to beauty, but she had a charm of her own. Fammy—in moments of expansion—was wont to attribute this to what she called her “round-oval scrap of a face.” Mabel’s face was not round and it was not oval. It was something between the two, and that something was exceedingly attractive so that—on looking at her—you experienced a desire to run your finger from one small ear to the other, hesitating, without doubt, over the small but determined chin. Her mouth was straight but redeemed by lips which were soft and full. Her hair was brown, and bobbed, and full of life. It grew very thickly in an unrestrained and savage fashion, and it was this which had led John Henry to his belief in Little David’s large head. The head of Mabel was small, and dainty, and well suited to the rest of her slender person. Her eyes were grey, set well apart under a generous brow, honest in expression, and exceedingly appealing. Her face in repose was one that—if you happened to meet it out walking and such things were possible—you would immediately kiss as a matter of instinct and because you felt that it was the correct thing to do.

Fammy always did so, but then she was different. She knew that Mabel was in need of kisses. Many people are. She appeared to have forgotten the fact in the present instance, however, and this is not to be wondered at. She had loved, mothered, and pitied

Mabel from infancy upwards, and she had every intention of continuing to do so—but Fammy was a woman. Mabel, for the moment, had ceased to be her foster-child and become a sister-woman. One, too, who had acted in a fashion that caused the flesh of Fammy to creep and feel hot and uncomfortable. So Fammy, without removing her eyes from Mabel's face, slowly crossed the room, sat down in a chair, and continued her scrutiny. It was rather cruel, but even the best of women are cruel at times—to their own kind.

How long this would have continued is hard to say, but there came an interruption; and the interruption, which was simple in origin, was somewhat startling in nature. A quantity—about half a sackful—of soot and cement fell with a rush and clatter on the open hearth, ruining the freshness of the tidy kitchen and causing the two females to start in alarm.

“There now!” said Fammy, in tones of immense vexation, but her vexation was not caused by the soot.

Mabel's figure had collapsed, at the sound, into a crouching attitude of apprehension. She clutched the front of her dress. The colour ebbed from her face, leaving it white and drawn, and on it sat the self-same expression of terror that had moved the heart of John Henry to pity Little David.

“There now, my precious!” said Fammy, and she drew the trembling figure to her ample breast. “You have nothing to fear with your old Fammy about, bad-tempered, sour old thing though she may be. Fancy me staring at you like a Sphinkses—an animal that lives in the East, my dear, where Alfred was a soldier—and you all a-quiver and a bundle of nerves with the way them brutes treated you. You do not require to tell your old Fammy anything at all. She knows by looking at you that there is nothing to be ashamed of. You are my little girl still, same as you were years ago when I could lift you with one hand.”

“Oh Fammy! It is good to be with you. I never thought to see you again. I could never have faced you if——”

"That's where you are wrong," said Fammy with emphasis. "If it so happened that you had acted foolish-like and were in trouble; if all the doors in the world were shut tight against you; why, then your old Fammy would almost be glad, for she is a selfish old woman and would have you all to herself for ever."

"You are a dear, Fammy," said Mabel, and she kissed her with affection—Mabel, it may be remarked in passing, could kiss in a very affectionate and engaging fashion.

"That may be," said Fammy, "but I do not hold with what you have been doing. It makes my hair stand on end to think of the risks you have been running. You must never do so again."

"Never, never, *never*," said Mabel with vehemence, and then she added in an altered voice: "No—at least I don't think so."

Over the girl's head Fammy's eyebrows rose in an arch of interrogation, but she spoke with assurance.

"Of course you will not. Not that I am blaming you over-much. The fault lies at the door of your father. Some one should tell him that you are alive. If ever a man deserved a frosted turnip in his bed in place of a hot water bottle, he does. That reminds me—talking of beds—the blind man left a message for you."

Mabel detached herself hurriedly and regarded her foster-mother in astonishment, but Fammy, with an impassive face, set about sweeping up the hearth.

"Talking of beds! The blind man! Whatever do you mean?"

"He said his name was John Henry Millman," said Fammy, sweeping busily, "and he also said that he would like to see you again. He wanted to be sure that you were safe, and he kept calling you Little David. Positively indecent it was to listen to him!"

"Oh!" said Mabel. She hesitated for a second and then continued with indignation. "He is not blind. He is very far from blind, and he said a great deal more than that!"

"So you *were* listening at the door," said Fammy, nodding at the fire. "I thought as much when I heard it creak."

"I—I wanted to make sure that he thought me a boy."

"She wanted to make sure that he thought her a boy," repeated Fammy, apparently to the fire. "Well, well, I suppose one ought to be thankful for small mercies!"

Mabel, who at times showed wisdom, made no comment on this utterance, and presently Fammy continued, still addressing the fire.

"Better for her to want to make sure of that," she said distinctly, "than to want him to make sure of the other thing. The poor innocent believes you are Little David, and he must continue to do so. Little David will never be seen again. That is the end of that."

Fammy, however, had a shrewd suspicion that it was only the beginning. She was sufficiently human to have a lurking hope in that direction, and this prompted her next question.

"What is he, Miss Mabel—apart from being blind and simple?"

"I don't know why you persist in calling him blind," said Mabel, "and he is not simple. I do not know what he is except that he is kind and looked after me as well as you would have done yourself. There is no reason why he should not think me a boy. No one ever found out except the Dainty Brute—and he was a beast. After that it was different, for I was afraid."

Fammy paused in her labours and stared at the fire.

"Of all the queer things!" she said in wondering tones. "To think of you—my own foster-baby—the nicest, quietest girl I ever knew, stravaging about the country-side dressed as a boy!" She paused and absently rubbed her nose with the end of the brush, covering herself with soot in the process. "To think of your respectable father, sitting up to his eyes in his money and his pride, without a thought of what you are or might be, and you spending the night in the company of a strange man! It beats everything!"

"Fammy! You are ruining your clothes," said Mabel.

Fammy looked up, and the introspection faded from her eyes. She nodded once or twice, and her voice was decided and serious.

"Yes," she said, "but clothes can be washed clean and made just as fresh as they were before. You cannot do that with everything, and don't you go and forget it. I'm a poor woman, but I know what are the best things in life. I love you and want to see them all in your hands. I know it is dull and lonely for you at home, but you must promise never to go out on your own as a boy again, without, first of all, telling me about it."

"I promise very willingly," said Mabel seriously. "Indeed I have no wish even to go outside the door. I'm scared at the slightest sound."

Fammy returned to the sweeping up of the hearth.

"You go and change into some of your own clothes," she said. "You will find everything ready to put on same as they always are—waiting for you to come in when you like. Run away now and leave my black face alone."

Left alone, Fammy sat back on her heels, and the brush fell unheeded on the floor. She remained thus for a long time, looking with her blackened face like a heathen fire-worshipper, but the trend of her thoughts was far from pagan. She was a simple soul, and held simple, odd little beliefs at which many learned people sneer and some attempt to ridicule.

"I done it every night since I first held her in my arms," she muttered, "and perhaps that has something to do with it. I can explain it in no other way."

What Fammy had done every night since Mabel was a baby I do not attempt to outline, for she closed her eyes at this point, and, although her lips moved, the words were not audible. She did speak aloud, a second later, and that I can record, for her voice was strong and vigorous.

"It will not help to clean up this mess, however," said Fammy, and went on with her task with application.

Mabel found both the kitchen and Fammy clean and smiling when she appeared from above clad in a fitting and seemly fashion.

"You had best write home and say you are with me," said

Fammy. "It will be better for you to stay here till your nerves are normal, instead of moping in the big house by yourself."

"They know that I am here," said Mabel, and she paused in some confusion. "I'm sorry, Fammy, but I had to say I was going somewhere, and I knew they would not suspect anything if they thought I was here."

"Well, well," said Fammy, and she sighed. "That is all past and done with. What you want now is rest and quiet, and that you will have, for no man ever comes here now that poor Alfred has gone away."

Men had grown to Fammy to stand for an excessive noise and disturbance. This was due to Alfred. He had been her husband, and although he had been dead for years Fammy always spoke as if he had just that moment left the room. Her married life had not been happy. Alfred had been weak and selfish, and, while he expected her to work hard during the day, had thought nothing of filling her kitchen, night after night, with his noisy companions. Fammy's clean fire-side was a pleasant spot at which to sit and drink. Fammy had borne with him in silence for that which she had imagined him to be before marriage, and the fullness of her generous heart had expended itself on Mabel. Alfred had literally gone out, one evening, suddenly as a candle might when an extinguisher descends on the flame, and the mind behind the extinguisher thinks: "Enough! Put out the light and rest."

Fammy had been resting for several years.

"There are men, and men, and also *men*," said Fammy to Mabel, that night, as they sat by the fire, "but I never saw any man look like that blind man of yours when I asked him what his business was. He is a poor creature that wants to be looked after, of that I am certain."

"I wish, Fammy—" commenced Mabel in apparent indignation, but whatever it was she wished did not transpire for, at that moment, there came a hesitating knock at the door.

"That will be Mrs. Beedbit," said Fammy. "She always knocks

soft-like when she wants to borrow anything. She has lodgers, poor soul. Bring her in like a dear child while I make up the fire. You cannot mistake her. She will be standing on the doorstep like the penitent thief."

Mabel, however, did not find Mrs. Beedbit on the doorstep. She found a vastly different person. One that drew an exclamation of horror from her lips and brought the red blood to her cheeks in shame and distress. It was the melancholy odd man from the Black Bull at Tipping Horley and he held a parcel in his hand. He was wrapped in a gloom that seemed infinitely profound and he did not appear to look at Mabel with either of his eyes. They roamed about like two independent parties engaged on an active competition to find something that was lost.

"What do you want?" panted Mabel, and she half closed the door and peered out at the crack.

The odd man had not an opportunity of replying, for Fammy who had heard the cry arriving at this moment—her maternal instincts aroused—whisked Mabel on one side, opened the door, and filling the doorway with her ample form, confronted him like an indignant fury. She opened her mouth to speak, but words failed her at the sight of the odd man. She stood, resting her hands on her hips, while Mabel peeped out from behind her skirts like a protected chicken.

"Don't tell me that this is another one!" she said presently in tones of despair. Then she continued in an altered voice. "If it's trouble you are looking for, my man, and you seem to be looking for something, you have come to the right door. If you are not outside my gate in ten seconds you will be sorry for it!"

The odd man laughed.

"Trouble!" he said. "Trouble is looking for me—calling for me like mad, I should imagine by experience." He thrust out a parcel done up in brown paper. "Things should be returned to their owners. This belongs to the young man who was at our house, last night, with his little brother."

"What is it?" asked Fammy, interested, slightly mollified, but regarding the parcel with suspicion as if it might fly up and bite her face. "Not that I understand what you are talking about," she added hastily.

"Pyjamas," said the odd man. "Pyjamas suitable for an adult lady of generous proportions."

Fammy gasped and acted with precision and despatch. Her fist shot out and would—in the natural course of events—have landed on the nose of the odd man, but that gentleman—in spite of his wandering eyes—caught it neatly when it was a fraction distant from his face. He held it firmly, but gently, and returned it, as it were, to its owner with thanks.

"Trouble always finds me," he said, and there was a weary note in his voice. "Trouble, noise, and abuse are after me all day long in the Black Bull, so I expect it comes natural for them to follow me when I go out."

Fammy was never able to explain afterwards why she did it. She pointed this out to Mabel that same night as they were going to bed, and for a long time afterwards she pointed it out to her on every possible occasion. There were things one did, according to Fammy, just because one did them and for no other reason.

"Come in and sit by the fire," said Fammy, and she stood on one side to permit of the odd man entering, "then you can tell us what you are after."

The odd man came in and sat by the fire. Fammy sat opposite to him, lost apparently in a species of astonished trance caused by his appearance. Mabel sat between the two but well in the rear, in a reserved and inconspicuous fashion. The odd man presented an even more extraordinary spectacle than he had done in the Black Bull on the previous night. His apron had, of necessity, vanished. He was dressed in an old and faded suit of clothes which he failed to fill and his beard had disappeared, but—to make up for this perhaps—a long gash spread across his chin. His boots were in keeping with his hat which reposed on the

floor—they were both green and mottled with age. He looked, more than ever, like a sorry and dispirited ghost, and the gash on his chin gave the impression that he had been attempting to commit suicide and failed in the attempt.

“Beer!” said Fammy, interrogatively and suddenly, coming out of her trance with a start.

The face of the odd man lit up with an unholy joy.

“Beer!” he repeated, dwelling on the word with unction. “Beer! *Beer!* Yes, it might be done with beer, but you would want a lot. Then you could slip the whole boiling of them in at one time and watch them drown to death. It would be great!”

“You blood-thirsty ruffian!” gasped Fammy. “What do you mean?”

“The Tippling Howling Maniacs that kept people awake all night, the landlord that would not take two lost travellers into his house, the people—whoever they may be—who frightened a g-boy half out of his wits—the whole damned lot of them swimming about at one time,” said the odd man with great animation. He withdrew the eye which had been staring at the fire—the other one continued to gaze at a point on the wall—and fixed Fammy with a fierce glare. “I would stand at the edge with a stick and rap their knuckles when they tried to climb out!”

“Bless us!” said Fammy. “What a strange man it is, almost as queer as the blind creature that called here this morning.”

The odd man sat forward and one long lean hand shot out accusingly at Fammy.

“None of that!” he said fiercely, and he transferred his other eye from the wall and glared at Fammy’s face with both eyes at one and the same time. He grimaced grotesquely, as he did this, for the manœuvre appeared both complicated and difficult. “None of that. There is them that I will not hear a word against from you or anyone else!”

Fammy gasped, stricken dumb between astonishment and alarm, for the odd man was a fearsome spectacle; but Mabel, who had

been regarding him from behind with a deep distrust and some confusion, suddenly drew her chair forward on a level with the others and became confident, and composed, although still somewhat flushed. Whether it was the words of the odd man, or the sight of his fearsome face, which brought this to pass, I cannot tell. It happened. That is all I know.

This move of Mabel's, in the case of Fammy, acted as a corrective to the sight of the odd man. She snorted. It also acted as a corrective to the odd man himself. His eyes returned to their former and diverse occupations, and he relapsed back into his chair. There was an interval during which Fammy was faintly heard to affirm: "Of all the queer things!" but this was a mere whisper and it was the odd man who eventually broke the silence.

"A butcher does not want to spend the evening surrounded by stacks of dead meat, and the same applies to drink. I will not have any beer—thanking you all the same." He made a ghostly pass with his left hand, and his left eye showed a tendency to stray from the fire in the direction of Mabel. "To tell one person what another person thinks and says about them is the first step towards a crime."

Fammy, who was simple and somewhat distraught, looked alarmed at this, but Mabel, who no doubt was cold, bent forward to warm her hands at the fire—in fact her hands appeared to appeal humbly to the fire for warmth. She had pretty little hands. There was something very touching in her attitude as if she were throwing herself on the mercy of some mighty presence that had to be placated.

The odd man achieved a terrible and complicated contortion, and both his eyes stared at the same photograph on the wall. If he did this to avoid looking at Mabel, it was unfortunate, for the photograph in question was of that young woman, taken quite recently, and it showed a plaintive, odd, little face with two honest, confiding eyes, and was, in effect, quite engaging and charming.

The odd man frowned, then he appeared to smile, and last of all he made a despairing motion with his hands and commenced to speak; but before he achieved this feat Fammy uttered a cryptic remark in a toneless voice.

"I've been doing it for nineteen years," she said, "ever since she was a baby, so *you* need not worry! If you think you can withstand her when she wants to hear anything, I'm sorry for you!"

"When a man's arm is stiff," said the odd man suddenly, "it has to be rubbed till he jumps with the pain"—Mabel jumped, by the way, but never mind—"then he feels better. That is that. A man is hungry till he has had breakfast, and that is that. A man who takes the trouble to speak kindly—when there is no one about to hear—to a creature that every one else spits at, is not going to think evil of any creature under the sun—without proof, and that is also that. Lastly, a man likes to hear about the things he is interested in, even when they do not exist, and the man I'm thinking about believes firmly in the existence of a thing like that."

"It's about time you went back to Tipping Horley," said Fammy with decision, but her voice was kindly.

The odd man laughed.

"It is," he said with grim enjoyment. "They will have shouted themselves hoarse by now. They don't even know I have gone. I have not been away from that place, for more than an hour at a stretch, for months. It will do them good."

He rose abruptly to his feet, and, assuming his hat, drifted towards the door. There he paused, and his eyes once more entered into an individual and active competition to find something that appeared to be lost.

"A man's property should be returned—when it is of value to him," he said, and he coughed. Then his voice fell several tones deeper and he seemed to descend into the depths of gloom. "Questions do not require to be answered, but there is no harm in making a remark. I am searching for something—something I

stopped looking for years ago—till to-day. I shall not find it, of course, but that is no reason why other people should not. Good-night!”

He departed as the last words were on his lips, and left the house so rapidly that Mabel, who had risen to her feet, was only in time to hear his steps receding along the road. She went out to the gate and called a farewell greeting, but there was no reply. She came back to the kitchen, and there Fammy greeted her with a remark, and a face that was both severe and softened.

“A man’s property should be returned when it is of value to him!” she said, and she held up, not the pyjamas which lay disregarded on the table, but the note John Henry had received that morning. This she had found where he had thrust it when the boots commenced to rub his arm—in the pocket of the objectionable pyjamas.

“Oh!” said Mabel, and she grew very red in the face.

“I have not read it, my dear,” said Fammy. “I am not that kind with any one I like and trust, but I am going to send it back to its owner. He deserves that, for he will never have another note from the one that wrote it, if I guess aright who that person may be.”

“Oh!” said Mabel, for the second time, but the inflection of her voice was entirely different.

“Run and light the lamps upstairs,” said Fammy in an altered voice. “We must go to bed soon.”

Mabel went, and the moment she had gone Fammy grasped the tongs, lifted the objectionable pyjamas, deposited them on the fire, and held them there till they were burnt to ashes, but the note she slipped into the bosom of her gown.

“I could not sleep easy with them things lying about,” she muttered. “The mere thought of them with him inside makes me feel indecent. Of all the queer things! I wonder what it will lead to, for every road ends somewhere!”

She straightened herself with a jerk and gazed at the ceiling in

an attitude of attention, while her face softened and grew exceedingly tender.

"I've never heard her do that before of her own accord," she muttered, "and I've been longing to hear it all my life."

In the room above Mabel was singing. She was far from keeping in tune, but that did not matter. It was the quality of her voice which pleased Fammy.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TERRIBLE ORDEAL OF JOHN HENRY MILLMAN

JOHN HENRY, about this time, gave unmistakable signs that something unusual was afoot. He was wearing his grandfather's scarf-pin—a handsome trifle, and as that remained in the keeping of a Hebrew gentlemen in Praed Street unless under exceptional circumstances, this, by itself, was remarkable. There were other and even stranger signs, however. Veronica—I have said nothing about Veronica so far, but I shall make haste to rectify the error—perceived with a growing astonishment that for five consecutive days he had dined at the Italian restaurant over the way, where you can have no meal cheaper than one and eightpence. This was an unparalleled circumstance, and it continued. He had an egg, too, every morning with his breakfast, although this was not so exceptional since eggs—owing to the kindly action of the hens—were cheaper at the moment. When, however, a new hat appeared in his room, then Veronica was forced to suspect either that he had gone mad, or that he had found some illicit means of obtaining money.

She was disturbed. Her life revolved round John Henry. She believed him to be quite incapable of looking after himself. His habit of writing was the one point in his character to which she had objection. It was unnatural and indecent—she had once read a stray sheet where he had expatiated on the charms of a female character. The thought that he might make money by such a means never occurred to her. People, she knew, were not fools. She decided that some unscrupulous person had got hold of him to use as an innocent and unthinking instrument for some

vile purpose. She never suspected John Henry personally. That, she knew, was impossible, but she was fired with a great desire to save him from disaster.

John Henry lived in what had once been a dwellinghouse but was now a rabbit-warren. He was, and had been for some time past, the ground floor back; just as Veronica was, and had been from the day she left her Charity Home, the servant of the establishment. The house belonged to one by name Mrs. Baldwin, by occupation a lodging-house keeper, and by nature, a bitter-tempered shrew. John Henry "did" for himself in this abode of bliss with no attendance, but he had more attendance than any other creature in the house, or indeed in most houses. Veronica looked after him. His room was invariably clean, with everything just as he left it. He was a man of tidy habits, but he was a man. That is to say he was untidy to the feminine mind and nature. Veronica bore with this and made no attempt to rectify it. She was a woman of great wisdom.

Mrs. Baldwin, although she was a shrew, had a sense of justice. She also knew when she had what she called "a good thing" in her grasp. Veronica worked hard, cost little, and had a small appetite. She was not attractive to look at and gave no trouble in that direction. Her appearance incited remarks from the boys in the neighbourhood, and so she seldom went out. Mrs. Baldwin liked going out. She liked going out every night, if it were only to the bar round the corner. Not that any one could accuse Mrs. Baldwin of being intemperate—far from it. She was never the worse for drink. It was impossible to make her drunk. Liquor disappeared down her capacious throat as into a barrel, silently and with no effect. Under these circumstances Veronica suited Mrs. Baldwin down to the ground, and her sense of justice insisted that the girl's work should be finished at eight o'clock each night. It did not, however, deter her from locking the coal cellar and larder doors when she went out for the evening.

That was where John Henry came in. He had descended—one

night shortly after his arrival—to the depths where Mrs. Baldwin existed, in pursuit of a shilling for the slot of the gas-meter. It was a very cold night with snow and rain in the air, and slush and dirt in the streets. He stumbled down the back stairs, felt his way along a dark, cold passage, and emerged in a huge, gloomy cavern of a room which had once been the cheerful kitchen of a large and prosperous house. Mrs. Baldwin was not there. In fact he imagined that there was no one there. He was quickly disillusioned on this point, however.

“What has brought *you* down here?” demanded a shrill, indignant voice.

John Henry perceived that what he had thought, at first sight, to be a bundle of old clothes thrown on a chair by the hearth was, in truth, a girl. He was astonished, for there was little but the remnants of a fire in the grate, and the one gas-jet on the wall gave an exceedingly insufficient light. The girl, who was Veronica, repeated her question in an even shriller voice; but she remained in the chair and in the shadow cast by the mantelshelf.

“I wondered—” commenced John Henry hesitatingly, and he shivered in the chill atmosphere of the place. “I wondered,” repeated John Henry with confidence, “if you would care to come up and sit by my fire instead of freezing down here in the cold.”

Veronica laughed a short, bitter laugh.

“Oh, no, you did *not*,” she said, and she rose and stood in the light. There was not much light, but it was sufficient to outline her uncouth, lop-sided figure, the yellow, wizened face, and the dark, lifeless hair drawn into a small and unlovely knot.

John Henry saw all this, but it was the expression of a dumb animal waiting to be struck across the face that attracted his attention the most. He saw this so clearly that Veronica’s grotesque appearance passed unnoticed.

“Your kind don’t want to have anything to do with me,” said Veronica grimly. “I would have plenty of trouble in this house if my outside were different.”

that Veronica, for the first time, was seated at ease, and the sight pleased him.

"What have you been busy at, Veronica?" he asked.

"Standing outside of your door waiting to hear if you would remember," said Veronica in a stifled voice, "and . . . my God . . . you did!"

She flung her apron over her head and burst into a torrent of passionate weeping. John Henry remained where he was and said nothing, and presently Veronica, having ceased to weep, mopped her face and left the room. At the door she looked back at John Henry and spoke.

"I'm not going to say anything, for I can't," she said. "It would be foolish. I'm going to 'do' for you."

It may be remarked in passing that she very nearly did "do" for poor John Henry, because her ambition rose, at first, to the height of cooking him fancy meals. John Henry found it necessary to convince her that he was a cook both by birth and inclination. He succeeded eventually but it was a hard task. Veronica was far from being a fool.

The remarks of Mrs. Baldwin, when she learnt that Veronica was to be seen constantly passing into John Henry's room of an evening, may be imagined, but they cannot be printed. According to Mrs. Baldwin there would have been nothing to say at all if Veronica had been pretty, or even fairly pleasant to look at, but as it was—well! Mrs. Baldwin had a fair flow of language and quite a good wind, and the neighbours, while they were thrilled to the marrow, were also exceedingly disappointed.

Veronica had listened in silence to a considerable discourse which had reference to herself, but when Mrs. Baldwin diverged to John Henry, she leant forward with such a fierce expression on her withered face that Mrs. Baldwin was struck dumb of a sudden—stopped like a gramophone when you lift the sound-box.

"That's enough," said Veronica. "Say a word against him and I'll spit in your face. I'm not anything more to him than a cat

Veronica, as I have said before, was a woman of great wisdom.

"Just as you please," said John Henry, "but it would be kinder if you come up. I am not rich and two fires burn a lot of coal. Are you coming up, or am I going to bring down a shovelful?"

They regarded each other in silence for a few moments and then Veronica spoke in a short and ungracious voice.

"I'll come up," she said.

She came up, and John Henry was forced to go out into the snow in search of his shilling, for he did not wish Veronica to suspect the real reason of his descent to the depths. He returned and went on with his work; and Veronica sat on the edge of a chair in an uncomfortable attitude, regarding him with suspicion, till it was time to go to bed. She did not utter one word during that time. As she was going out of the door, however, she did.

"She locks up everything when she goes out," she said shortly.

John Henry looked up from his task and bade her good-night, and the next evening he watched for the departure of Mrs. Baldwin and then called Veronica up from the depths. She came and sat on the same chair, but she occupied a slightly larger portion of it, and that night she managed to say good-night of her own accord. This went on for four nights, but on the fifth night John Henry was so engrossed in his work that he forgot about Veronica altogether. He remembered as the clocks were striking ten, and he sprang to his feet in horror.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed in a voice of vexation, "and it is the coldest night we have had this year! I must call her up at once!"

This was not necessary, however, for the door opened at that point and Veronica came slowly into the room.

"I've been busy," she announced ungraciously, "so if you called me you wasted your breath."

She crossed to her chair while John Henry, with a sigh of relief, returned to his task. Presently he looked up and perceived

or a dog, and you know it for all your foul talk. You leave me alone and I'll leave you. I do my work well, and you will get no one else to do it for nothing. That's the end of that."

It was, and the neighbours were, as I have already said, exceedingly disappointed. The more so since they believed that Veronica's words were true, and that, by itself, was an immense disappointment. They almost felt indignant against John Henry because he had not acted in the fashion indicated by Mrs. Baldwin. It would have been so interesting to see him go by and to think horrible things about him, so pleasant to point him out to friends and acquaintances. He was out, fortunately, when the interview took place, and no one ever dared to mention it to him; so the matter was of no moment.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, when Veronica came to the conclusion that John Henry was sailing gaily towards some fearful disaster, she should be filled with a great determination to save him. The appearance of the hat convinced her that something was wrong; and John Henry, himself, supplied added proof by an altered demeanour. He was moody, and disturbed, and irritable. He spent a considerable time each day in reading and re-reading three letters which appeared both to please and yet to sadden him. The first letter you are familiar with. It does not bear repeating. But with the others you are not.

The second letter said:

"Mr. Millman sir your obedient servant Mrs. Bluebell has done what was asked of her and wishes to say that Little David is well and happy and has no wish to see you again leastwise that is not what"—John Henry spent a long time over the next word which was nothing but a blot—"he says but what he means. Mrs. Bluebell is very grateful for your kindness and she thinks you ought to have your eyes seen to at once for you will be the better of it and wishing you all respects herewith."

This letter was written in a large, straggling hand, with a total

disregard of punctuation, and there was a detached and astonishing statement lower down on the sheet.

"Him that has two eyes was here."

John Henry, pondering the postscript, evaded with difficulty the thought that Mrs. Bluebell's friends were all people with only one, or more than two eyes. He could make nothing of it till he recalled the surprising fact that Little David's first note had come enclosed in Mrs. Bluebell's letter. Then he knew that "him that has two eyes" must be the odd man from the Black Bull at Tipping Horley. This brought the thought to John Henry's mind that every one was very kind to him without reason. Perhaps they were.

The third letter said:

"Dear big-hearted Brother, I am enclosing the money I borrowed, and wish to say that I have thought of you every day since I left the Black Bull. I am quite well and happy, and there is no necessity for you to worry about me. I hope your arm is quite all right now, and that you do not regret having wasted so much time and money on Little David who cannot say how grateful he is and always will be."

There was a postscript to this letter.

"Little David would like very much to see you again but he cannot, for he has promised not to do so, otherwise I think he would."

There was a second postscript to this letter.

"Little David does not mean that. What he means is that he hopes he will see you again, but he cannot come to see you or ask you to come and see him. That is impossible."

There was a third postscript to this letter.

"Yours were burnt by Mrs. Bluebell. I could not help it."

This third letter disturbed John Henry because he imagined that Little David was not happy. There was no address, and the postmark was the same as that on Mrs. Bluebell's letter. John Henry knew what he wanted to do, but failed to see how it could be done.

He wanted to make quite certain that Little David was out of trouble, and as he wanted to do this without letting the boy see him, and as he did not even know where he was, or what his name might be, the matter presented difficulties the solutions of which he failed to fathom.

In the unsettled condition produced by this state of affairs he went, by appointment, to the offices of Canning and Canning; and there he found the Dainty Brute seated in the general office, complacently admiring the shine on his highly polished boots. The sight of this gentleman completely drove the agonizing sensations that the office aroused from John Henry's mind. He—you will scarcely credit it but it is true—absolutely forgot where he was and what he had come for, and he acted just as if he were in ordinary and commonplace surroundings. He approached the Dainty Brute and tapped him on the shoulder.

"You," he said, "are the very man I have been trying to find."

The Dainty Brute, alarmed at the tone of his voice, looked up; and the sight of John Henry's face did not lessen his alarm. He rose unexpectedly, shot his chair towards John Henry, missed him by an inch, and, making for the door, fled out of the building with John Henry in hot pursuit.

It is a terrible and sad reflection to think that John Henry left the building without even a thought of the Three Mighty Beings who awaited his arrival wrapped in the unspeakable majesty of their great calling.

The Dainty Brute ran, and John Henry ran after him, and as London streets are not good places to run in without attracting attention, the Dainty Brute diverged into Blank Street, and putting on speed, gained the far end just as John Henry appeared at the other. He would have been away, lost in Charing Cross Road, and out of sight before John Henry could have reached him, but, as he turned into that thoroughfare, a constable turned out of it. The Dainty Brute cannoned into the constable, and John Henry in the distance raised a shout; whereupon the constable, grasping

the Dainty Brute, drew him back into Blank Street and towards John Henry.

"Thank you, officer," said John Henry, panting but keeping his eyes fixed on the Dainty Brute. "Thank you for stopping him."

"Lord bless you," said the constable. "There is nothing in that. I would stop him on suspicion if he was running after his own hat. I know him well. We all know him well, and he knows us. He will make no attempt to escape now that I have stopped him."

The constable, who was a young fresh-faced officer, released his hold of the Dainty Brute and turned to John Henry.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed in an astonished voice. "I know you too. You are the man who took the boy away from here some weeks ago. What do you want with Isaac Farstein?"

"That is the man I took him from," said John Henry fiercely, "and I want to have a word with him about the way the boy had been treated."

"Oh, ho!" said the constable. "This sounds interesting. Mr. Isaac Farstein is starting a new line of business! What were *you* doing with the boy?"

The Dainty Brute made no reply but contented himself with glaring malevolently at John Henry.

"I want to know that also," said John Henry.

"He wants to know that also!" repeated the Dainty Brute. He appeared to be startled, incredulous, and finally amazed.

"I do," said John Henry. "That is the main reason why I pursued you. I want to know how he came into your clutches, and what you were going to force him to do."

"Well I'm damned if this does not beat everything," said the Dainty Brute, and he burst into a roar of laughter.

"You had better go, Robert," he said to the constable, when he had recovered sufficiently to speak. "You are not wanted here. You cannot arrest me for running along the street. You would be wise not to do so on suspicion, for it will go against yourself. You have proof of nothing and neither has he."

"There is truth in what the man says," said the constable, turning apologetically to John Henry. "I cannot detain him without reason. He is a blackleg, but he is clever. We know all about him, but we can seldom prove anything. He has brought more than one of us into trouble and disgrace."

The Dainty Brute smiled as if highly gratified by a graceful compliment.

"That's a fact," he said complacently. "There is no reason for this gentleman to want you to detain me. There is no reason why I should want to run away from him—now. In fact I shall remain with him like a brother till he tells me to go."

"In that case," said the constable, "I'll be moving on. Good-day, sir, and good luck!"

He went towards Soho, leaving John Henry and the Dainty Brute staring at each other, the former with animosity, and the latter with assurance and amused self-possession.

"What did you do with the boy?" asked the Dainty Brute with evident curiosity.

"Took him to his people," said John Henry shortly, "where he is safe, for if I know nothing, they know everything both about him and you."

"My hat! What an escape!" said the Dainty Brute with obvious sincerity, but to what he referred did not transpire. He meditated profoundly, and he cast furtive glances at John Henry as he did so, then he appeared to come to a decision. "We cannot stand here like a couple of fools," he said. "Come along with me—that is if you are not afraid!"

"I'm not afraid of you, or any one," said John Henry shortly, "and as I am determined to get the information I want, we might as well go somewhere where we can talk without attracting attention."

"You would attract attention—anywhere," said the Dainty Brute as they walked down Charing Cross Road.

John Henry resented the remark and the manner in which it was made, but he remained silent.

"Because you look so damned clever," continued the Dainty Brute as they commenced to cross the road.

"No necessity to be insulting," said John Henry shortly as they paused, held up by the traffic, on an island.

"That you would be bound to see everything except what was under your nose," ended the Dainty Brute, and as he said this he kicked John Henry violently on the ankle with the heel of his boot, took advantage of a gap in the traffic, and gained the opposite pavement in safety.

Poor John Henry, stunned by the suddenness of the action and the severity of the pain, stumbled, and saving himself by a miracle from falling under the wheels of a passing bus, clung to the lamp-post. By the time that the traffic permitted of his limping over to the pavement there was no sign or trace of the Dainty Brute to be seen. John Henry realized that he had been neatly and cleverly done. He limped into a Lyons tea-shop, ordered a cup of tea, and meditated upon himself in the light of a fool. It was as he was doing this, profoundly and with a deep contempt, that he remembered his appointment with the Three Mighty Beings of Mead House.

The memory drove him out of the shop with rapidity in spite of his foot. He was conscious of a sudden babel of talk as the door slammed behind him, but he gave it no thought. To this day John Henry is totally unconscious of the fact that he not only omitted to drink, but also to pay, for that cup of tea. He even forgot the Dainty Brute, and although Little David remained in his mind, he was in the background. John Henry was more than an hour late for his appointment.

He shuddered as he crossed the threshold of Mead House. His steps became slower and slower as he approached the door of Canning and Canning, the famous publishers. He thought of the Three Figures seated in the room of harrowing memories, and

his heart turned to water. He opened the door, and went in, and as he did so he clenched his teeth hard. There was no valid reason for being late that he could offer. In every panic he felt that he could offer none. He could not even apologize. He was tongue-tied.

Some things are better left unsaid. Mere words can but miserably convey the fury of a tiger deprived of its prey, or the dread majesty of a storm at sea, and so it is with the terrible ordeal John Henry Millman had to face. For me to attempt a description would be absurd. It would be a wanton waste of words. I wish to state, however, that John Henry returned home in a cab, and not in a hearse; and although he was prostrated and shattered to the core, he was still sufficiently conscious to feel the pain in his foot. He was deeply conscious also of having passed a misspent afternoon, and one that could have no possible advantage to any one except, perhaps the taxi-driver.

He was entirely at fault in his imaginings, as it happened, for the afternoon was, in truth, one of the best spent afternoons in his life. Several and excellent results transpired therefrom, two of which may here be mentioned. Veronica, who watched his arrival from the basement, was convinced of the fact that he had fallen into bad and unscrupulous hands, and she determined to act. The Dainty Brute, who had called at the office of Canning and Canning with the idea of blackmail in his mind, abandoned his object, frightened by John Henry's words on the subject of Little David's people. These by themselves constituted a sufficient justification for a damaged foot, and the keeping of Three Mighty Beings in impatient uncertainty; but there were other and greater results, and these you will appreciate as John Henry did—when he understood them.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID WEEPS BITTERLY

MABEL CANNING returned to the home of her father filled with good intentions judiciously administered by Fanny who was wise and knew just how to give good advice without seeming to do so. She had recovered, more or less, from the state of nerves in which John Henry had found her, and her outlook on life was considerably modified thereby. Mabel, being barely twenty, knew everything and was quite fitted to guide her own destiny—so she thought. It is only as one grows older that one realizes how utterly inefficient one's own thoughts and actions are.

The servants, with the exception of the housekeeper who looked on Mabel as a source of worry, welcomed her home. She was a favourite with them. Her father did not welcome her home. He had failed to grasp the fact of her absence. This was slightly discouraging, but it is foolish to lose heart at the first stile. The proper thing is to climb over and go on. Mabel went on. She commenced to study her father, attempting thereby, poor child, to arrive at a knowledge of his tastes and habits, his likings and objections. In this her father had helped her. He had no objection to her presence so long as she remained silent and non-existent.

Philip Canning, apart from being a publisher, was a fairly interesting man. He had ideas of his own and lived up to them. His life was a clean, well-regulated thing that went smoothly and without hitch. Mabel inherited the straight line of her mouth from him, only in his case it was not redeemed by lips both full and sensitive. He was austere and just by nature, æsthetic by taste, and of a somewhat mechanical turn of mind. His hobby was

engineering and the electric plant of his big house was a source of constant joy—to him. Mabel had an unfortunate habit of fouling the wires. He was proud of the business of which he was the head and owner, and he kept a firm grip and a guiding hand on every particular relating to it, although his inclinations lead him to remain at a distance from town. It was a well-known fact that nothing on earth could hurry Canning and Canning, but the reason for this was known to very few people. The real office of the firm was Philip Canning's study in the big house, some thirty miles from Paddington, and two miles distant from the town where the fast trains stop before dashing past Tipping Horley, Crompton, and other small places. The prestige of the firm lost nothing by this.

If any one had asked him what he thought about Mabel, Philip Canning would have been startled, for a second, because he did not think of her at all. She was there. She was his child. She had everything provided for her, even to an allowance of money to spend, and was consequently happy and contented. There was nothing to make her otherwise. She was part of his establishment like his dogs, only the dogs went out for walks with him frequently and this Mabel seldom did. The dogs fawned on him also and he patted them on the head. He had, at one time, been in the habit of patting Mabel on the head, but that was a long time ago when she was small. To pat a small child on the head is sensible, but to pat a large girl on the same place is foolish. The necessity has departed!

At the proper time he had selected a governess for the child—a quiet, decent, narrow-minded soul, devoid of imagination and of a strictly moral turn of mind. Later on he had selected a school—a good, expensive, steady concern where no nonsense was allowed and very few pupils admitted. The schooling past, his interest had awakened, for a few moments, to the fact of her permanent return home; but the sight of Mabel in her short skirts, grubby after a journey and scared to death under his scrutinizing eyes, soon killed

that. She was a child. Some day she would become a woman and marry. He had no son. A fresh head would be wanted in the business eventually, but the necessity was not urgent. Meantime there was nothing to worry about. His life had gone on as usual—after an interval of petty annoyances.

These had been created by Mabel, and he had not hesitated to put a stop to them. Every Sunday morning they went to church together; but to interrupt him in his work, without reason, was absurd. He had told her so with decision. To expect him to be interested, too, in female children that he had never, and would never see, was equally as absurd as to think that he would permit Mabel to go on a visit to families that were neither sufficiently rich, nor sufficiently well born, for his child to associate with. To go on a visit to people he knew and approved of was different—it was, and this Mabel had very soon found out.

Philip Canning was a good man. His intentions were excellent towards Mabel and everyone else. He lived his life, drew satisfaction therefrom, and received the respect of the world at large which he undoubtedly deserved. He was as far from imagining that there was a want in Mabel's life as he would have been puzzled to know how to set about rectifying the matter. That he would have made the attempt there can be no doubt, but the idea never entered his head. He did not imagine that she was striving to consider his wishes, nor dream that the petty incidents which annoyed him arose from a desire on her part to please and arouse his interest. He lived—or rather he existed—badly in need of an earthquake, or some other slight disturbance, to awaken him to the facts that matter in life.

"Your father loves you just as I do—in his own fashion," had counselled the wise Fammy. "The difficulty lies in the fact that you do not understand him. You are young and unformed. He is older and his life is set. You must try to please him, and that will make you happy. You have a good try!"

Mabel considered that she had been making the attempt all her

life and the direct result had been the creation of Little David, but she did not mention this to Fammy. She determined to have a really good try. She was young and confident—Fammy had seen to that—but she made one fatal mistake. She commenced, as has already been stated, to study Philip Canning with a view to arriving at his likes and dislikes—as her father. She ended by studying him—as a human being. The judgment of youth is exceedingly merciless.

It was all very pitiful and human—one creature striving to grasp what another unwittingly withheld, like a blind man turning in his darkness towards the light of the sun which he has heard is there but cannot see.

Mabel was annoying. There can be no doubt on that point!

“I wish,” said Philip Canning, on the second morning after her return from Fammy’s, “that you would choose some place other than my study to ornament with flowers. I use the vase on my desk for pens and pencils—when I can keep them from disappearing.”

“I thought you liked daffodils,” said Mabel humbly.

“I do—in the garden,” replied her father, intent on an annoying point in a business letter.

“I’m sorry,” said Mabel in a small voice.

“What do you say?” He looked up from the letter with a frown. “Oh—never mind that! Don’t do it again,” he muttered absently, and became once more absorbed.

As they walked to church, one morning, Philip Canning had remarked on the beauty of a bed of daffodils. Mabel did not remind him of this. The vase on his desk was cracked, and a pile of letters had lain beside it. Water is injurious to letters when applied in bulk, and they had to be re-written. Philip Canning was annoyed, but he said nothing. Mabel, when she went to remove all the flowers from his study, found the desk closed and locked. She had never seen it closed before.

This was not encouraging. The daffodils that had been on the

desk lay in the waste-paper basket. This was not encouraging either, but Mabel, admonishing herself to patience, went on.

A few days after this incident young Peter Hemming put in an appearance. He has no part in this story, but he happened to be the god-child of Philip Canning and regarded by him with a species of affection—his father was iron, that to say he had made a large fortune out of that commodity. Perhaps this had a little to do with the appearance of the son. He was a nice lad, interested in sport, but he appeared to be made of some hard substance that would not bend. Conversation languished. Mabel, who was present, remained silent; but that was customary. Philip Canning, in desperation, offered the young man his cigarette case—with no cigarettes in it. The young man, awakening for a moment, produced his own. The two male things smoked.

Philip Canning felt impelled to make a remark.

“A most excellent cigarette,” he said, “I have seldom smoked with so much enjoyment. Where do you buy them? The brand is strange to me.”

Peter Hemming awoke and remained awake till the time of his departure. It appeared that he had a fine taste in tobacco. The cigarettes in question were made by a Greek at a small shop in Kensington. He had discovered the man by chance. He discoursed learnedly on tobacco. He even appeared to have some slight knowledge of the subject. While Philip Canning followed him to the door, Mabel fumbled for and found the stub end of her father’s cigarette. There was a name and address on it.

On Sunday afternoons it was the invariable custom of Philip Canning to sit in one particular easy chair and think. At least it was understood that he was thinking, but he frequently did so with his mouth open. On the particular Sunday in question, however, his mouth was shut in an exceedingly hard line when Mabel came in to administer tea. There was a small table beside the chair, and on this reposed a box of cigarettes of the brand smoked by the son of the iron gentleman.

"How does this come to be here?" asked Philip Canning, indicating the box.

He was a just man and never condemned without giving a culprit a chance of proving innocence.

"I—I bought them," faltered Mabel nervously.

There was an interval of silence during which she looked at him appealingly and with a rising colour, and he regarded her with a gathering frown.

"I dislike girls who smoke. Have you contracted the habit?"

"No," said Mabel tonelessly.

"Then why did you buy this?"

Philip Canning was not a liar. He abominated deceit—business matters always excepted.

"I—I don't know," said poor Mabel hopelessly. "I—I just bought them because—because——"

The sight of her father's face proved too much for her. She rose and hurried from the room. Philip Canning carried the box to his study and locked it away. The box had been crushed in post. Mabel had straightened it out and removed the damaged cigarettes. It did not occur to him that they had not been smoked. He was annoyed at the imagined deceit, but he spent some time in thinking out the matter. The conclusion he arrived at was kindly in intention, but his words were exceedingly badly chosen.

"I have taken charge of the box," he said at supper. "I want you to promise me not to smoke. You are only a child. When you become a woman then you can please yourself. Women do these things although I, personally, do not approve. Till then I must judge what is best for you."

His voice was austere kind, and it was the voice of tolerant experience talking to the infant of inexperience. Mabel, who had been drooping over her plate attempting to screw her courage up to the point of an open confession of her object, sat up, and the line of her mouth became suddenly apparent. A fleeting resemblance to a long-dead sister whom he had disliked crossed Philip Canning's

mind. The two straight mouths faced each other across the table.

"Well! I am waiting!" said Philip Canning, and his voice had hardened.

"I never want to see a cigarette again," said Mabel quietly. "I promise to respect all your wishes while I am in your house."

Her mind was full of bitterness. He had called her a child. When she became a woman, forsooth, she could judge for herself!

There was something to say for Philip Canning in the matter, but, unfortunately, there was no one present to say it. The balance remained with Mabel, however, for she went on. Philip Canning also went on—existing.

It was after the Cruxes came to dinner that Mabel unconsciously altered her attitude and commenced to study her father as a human being. The Cruxes were three in number—a father, a mother, and a daughter. Father Cruxe was large, and heavy, and in Parliament—that is quite enough to say about him. Mother Cruxe was an ally of father Cruxe, and father Cruxe's constituency was opposed to the idea of women suffrage. Mother Cruxe was also large, with a large voice, and a habit of fixing you with her eye. The daughter Cruxe was an elderly spinster who had a grudge against everything because she had grown old. She also had a secret passion for writing poetry. Since this was known to the entire Cruxe family, they all, with one accord, worshipped at the shrine of Philip Canning who was a publisher. He had no objection to the Cruxes—it was policy to know them. Mabel—to put it plainly—hated the whole bunch. She had been forced, on divers occasions, to stay in their house as an unwilling guest.

The dinner passed to the accompaniment of a flow of talk from which Mabel was studiously excluded. This did not worry her. What did worry her was that the daughter Cruxe regarded her, from time to time, with approval. To be approved of by the daughter Cruxe was galling to Mabel, acutely conscious of a frock over which the one and only girl friend whose friendship

she valued had raised appalled and protesting hands to heaven. Philip Canning's housekeeper had a taste of her own in clothes, and strong ideas on what a young girl should not wear. Mabel looked like a child of sixteen.

The daughter Cruxe—she would have sold her soul to appear ten years younger—knowing Mabel's age, was secretly infuriated. She had sufficient perception to see that Mabel was humiliated by her own appearance. In the pleasing way of womenkind that scratch after the fashion of a cat's velvet-clad claw, she insisted on the girl sitting on a stool before the fire, once the drawing-room was reached; and made a great fuss of her—as if she were an infant of no intelligence. Mabel bore with this in silence. When the men came in from their wine, then she intended to escape. She did, but not for long.

A half-circle was formed round the fire—this invariably happened when guests were present—while Mabel sat in the background. In the past she had been wont to sit quiet and listen, or sit quiet and dream—now she watched her father. The father Cruxe, having an eye to his daughter's poetical outbursts, had spent all the morning memorising a treatise on electricity. He commenced and sustained a conversation that vividly interested and somewhat surprised his host. The good man's mind was capable of containing facts, but—through long Parliamentary experience, no doubt—they became mixed and jumbled. The poetic soul of the daughter Cruxe, unconscious of the noble object of her sire's efforts, grew restive. She boiled over—on Mabel.

"Come and sit by the fire, dear child," she said sweetly. "You are quite out in the cold!"

"Thank you," said Mabel shortly. "I am very comfortable here."

The sharp tone of her voice reached Philip Canning's ear. The resigned, suffering expression of the daughter Cruxe—as of one who, attempting to be kind, had been rudely rebuffed—met his eye. He turned—in the middle of an exceedingly involved statement on the subject of dynamos—to look at Mabel, and saw her

flushed and defiant. His voice was harsh, for he was both annoyed and indignant. His daughter had no business to be rude to a guest in her father's house!

"Mabel! Come and sit by the fire," he said peremptorily.

Mabel came and sat on the stool, awkwardly, in obvious humiliation; and at the same time Philip Canning's daughter went—well I cannot say just where she went, but it was a great distance away from him. All her life, so far, she had been standing beside him, hoping, nay praying even—a fact although no one, not even Fanny, knew of it—that he might perceive she was there. Now she stood afar off. Distance is said to lend enchantment. Possibly it does. On the other hand when you are very near a person you fail to see them properly.

The next morning Mabel perceived that her father was growing bald; that his teeth required attention; that he had an awkward and unpleasant habit of contorting his face in the effort of concentration; that he did everything with an unnatural precision and always in the same fashion; and that he was the tallest and thinnest man she had even seen or imagined. Her eyes dwelt the longest on his mouth—it was one thin, hard, straight line. She sighed. Philip Canning would have been startled if he could have read the thoughts in the young head opposite him. He did think of Mabel, but it was only a passing thought that he was being kind in forbearing to say anything on the subject of her behaviour over-night.

It was very sad. Yes, it was uncommonly sad—when you come to think of how short life is!

Mabel, by the way, was hurt and quivering to the core.

"I must do something," she said, in the privacy of her room, but what it was that she must do, she failed to fathom.

What she did do was this. She locked the door, unlocked a drawer, drew out the pyjamas worn by Little David, and, seating herself on a chair, placed the garments on her knee. She sat very still for a long time—thinking. Presently she spoke aloud.

"*He* took me seriously," she said. "He is the first person who has ever done that. He would listen to what I had to say."

She was silent again for a space, and then:

"If I had not promised Fammy!"

She sighed. It did not occur to the poor child that very few people ever bother to keep a promise—unless it suits them to do so. She replaced the pyjamas, but she drew out the clothes of Little David. There were quite a number of them, too, clothes that John Henry had never seen.

"If Emma had not left!"

Emma had been a young housemaid dismissed by Philip Canning for undue familiarity with his daughter. He—good man—had not the remotest suspicion of the extent of the said familiarity.

"If only I *were* Little David!"

This was said very fiercely, but there was a suspicion of coming tears in the eyes and the soft lips had commenced to tremble.

"I am *not* a child. I will *not* cry!"

The fierceness of this utterance was unparalleled. She sat very tense, but her features worked into curious grimaces. Quite suddenly she clasped the clothes of Little David, kissed them with passion, and, rising and locking them away, hurried from the room.

In the library she seated herself at the desk and commenced to write a long letter. She was still writing when the gong sounded for lunch. She paid no attention to the sound, but went on. No one came to look for her, so it did not matter. The letter commenced: "Dearest Sheila," and ended: Yours ever, Mabel." There were pages of it, and the writing was small. In its way it was quite a human document—the overflow of a child's heart, sick with the desire for affection, desperate for a word of sympathy and encouragement. A silly document, doubtless, but very real to the writer.

"She will think me a fool and laugh," muttered Mabel, sitting back from her labours. "I cannot help it. I had to tell someone—or cry; and that I refuse to do."

She did, however, but that was later on—after dinner, to be exact, and it was entirely her own fault. She behaved foolishly. The writing of the letter had eased her mind. She had spent the afternoon thinking about her father, recalling the wise words of Fanny, and she spoke to him as the dessert was laid on the table. A most unwise action, because Philip Canning was lost in thought and obviously worried.

“Father!” she said and hesitated. Then the words came with a rush. “I want to ask you. I have wanted to ask you for a long time now. Have you ever thought that——”

“No doubt I have,” he interrupted testily, grasping the last few words and failing entirely to hear the appeal of the first. “I have a great deal to think about, and an important decision to make before morning. I am going up to town to-morrow. I shall be back in a few days. If you want to tell, or ask me anything, do so when I return.”

He pushed back his chair and rose austere and forbearing.

“Business must come first,” he said. “Good-night!”

The maid, entering to clear the table, was astonished to find her young mistress seated there with her head resting on her hands. Mabel rose at once and hurried away without a word, so the maid commenced to remove the dishes. She was more astonished still to find that Mabel’s napkin was missing. She searched, and searched, but failed to find the elusive article. She commented on the fact to the cook, and wondered where it had gone. The cook, who was fat and imaginative, held the opinion that the pixies had snatched it in an attempt to carry Mabel away to a place where some one would make a fuss of her. The truth of the matter was quite simple. Mabel had not wished the maid to find that napkin because, well, it was wet!

There were no tears in her eyes, however, as she climbed into bed, and the line of her mouth was very straight—rather like Philip Canning’s own mouth, in fact. There was no doubt or

uncertainty in her mind either, and although her words were few and quietly uttered, they expressed an infinity of meaning.

"If I had any place to go to where he could not find me, I would leave this house to-night."

Mabel, being a truthful child, there is no reason to doubt that she would have done so.

She lay very still in bed for a time, and then her voice came once more, only now it shook and the words were barely audible.

"Little David might find a place to go to, but there is no place for me. I—must—stay—here!"

She fell asleep on the thought.

CHAPTER X

THE ARRIVAL OF JOHN HENRY MILLMAN AT THE RED HOUSE

VERONICA, you will remember, had determined to act. She did. She commenced operations at the very first opportunity and examined everything in John Henry's room. She even read his old manuscripts, but the result of her efforts was disappointing. She could find nothing to give her the faintest clue as to how he was making money, yet she discovered a considerable sum. Notes, not one pound notes, but clean, white, five pound notes, reposed in the cracked tea-pot on the mantel-shelf. Veronica was more than perturbed. She grew to dread the sound of the front-door bell for fear the police had come for him. She knew that he had no income, no rich friends or relations, and she knew likewise that money cannot be got for nothing. It would have been quite different if John Henry had been capable of earning a living; but then, Veronica was assured he was not.

His appearance and manners did not lessen her distress. He was moody, unsettled, restless, and he seemed unable to write. There appeared to be something preying on his mind. He was apt to leave the house suddenly, for no apparent purpose or reason, and walk along the streets at a rapid pace as if he were attempting to escape from himself. Veronica had followed on several of these occasions and narrowly escaped detection, for he invariably retraced his steps abruptly and in the same sudden fashion. She could make nothing of it, and she was filled with foreboding.

He continued to spend money recklessly—he had something cold but substantial for supper every night and, although the hens had grown reserved, the morning egg was still in evidence.

Veronica augured the worst from this. She was distraught. She might, of course, have asked John Henry how he had made the money, and what it was that worried him; but the thought never entered her head. Veronica was a humble soul. She seldom asked questions. She would as soon have thought of addressing a petition to the Lord Chancellor, or stopping a mounted policeman—one of those magnificent creatures with white gloves and a stern air of being on important business—to ask the time, as obtrude herself into John Henry's private affairs. She worried, and watched, and examined each new person who crossed the doorstep with a searching scrutiny, and was filled with an overwhelming desire to do something for John Henry.

If Veronica had asked him, John Henry might have found it difficult to reply. He was worried over his book. He was worried about Little David. He was worried about the Three Mighty Beings of Mead House, for he had not only missed an appointment with them but had subsequently—through sheer nerves—committed other and strange misdemeanours in their presence. John Henry believed that they had grown to dislike the sight of him and his book, and this was disconcerting. The point which worried him the most, however, was one he failed to understand; but it was there for all that. He was a very simple soul—John Henry Millman, and there was one person he seldom considered or thought about, and that person was himself. From the day when he had found Little David in the street, he also appeared to have found a new self that demanded many things which were impossible, absurd, and even at times indecent. When John Henry walked out of the house in great haste, he was, in truth, trying to get away from himself.

The Dainty Brute might have partly solved this problem in the mind of John Henry, but the Dainty Brute had not done so. He had kept the fact of Little David's sex to himself, being a man of some humour and also, in many respects, a philosopher. He believed that Mabel Canning's people knew about her escapade

and also about himself, and he mourned over a lost and promising opportunity of blackmail; but he appreciated the fact of his own escape from a possible detection in the office of Canning and Canning.

He was far from imagining that he had been of immense use to John Henry, and this was only natural since John Henry, the Three Mighty Beings, indeed no one, suspected it at the time. He was, however, for the Three Mighty Beings, considering the amazing fact of John Henry's callous behaviour towards them on the day when he had fled from the office, pondering on his subsequent actions in their presence, came to the astounding conclusion that he, John Henry, was dissatisfied with them. The thought, at first, made them furious, but afterwards, as John Henry's work took shape and appeared in print and the said book drew words of commendation from divers quarters, the Three Mighty Beings became thoughtful, and—not to put too fine a point on it—determined to run no chance of losing the possibilities of profit within their grasp.

This was the reason for Philip Canning's journey to London; and the result of a long conference in the room of harrowing memories—at which a third and pleasant-faced gentleman assisted—was a letter addressed to John Henry, enclosing a second letter also addressed to him; and the contents of these two letters amazed John Henry exceedingly.

The first letter was precise and business-like. It came from Canning and Canning and it said:

“Dear Mr. Millman,—We have received a communication from Mr. George Cornwall on the subject of your book. Mr. Cornwall, who has had our utmost confidence for years, is of the opinion that your story lends itself admirably to being dramatized. He is himself a dramatist and critic of great literary worth, and we are only too pleased to fall in with his suggestion that you should meet and discuss the matter with him. In this you need feel no obligation to Mr. Cornwall, for he acts on our behalf.”

This letter, by the way, was signed by Philip Canning himself. An unparalleled circumstance!

The second letter was also short, but it was far from business-like. It was dated at the Red House, Litshot, signed Sheila Cornwall, and it said:

"Dear Mr. Millman,—Father has just telephoned to ask Muggie to write, inviting you down for a few days. Muggie does not know anything about you because father forgot to tell her and she is very bad on the 'phone—so she has deputed the task to me. We have both read your book and shall be delighted to see you when you arrive, but please do not come till after Thursday as I am expecting a friend to be with us till then. I suppose you have seen father and arranged everything, so just send us a wire of the day and time of your arrival."

The envelope of this second letter was addressed to "John Henry Millman, Esqr., c/o Canning and Canning, Publishers, London," otherwise John Henry might have been led to believe that it was intended for some other Mr. Millman. As it was the reading of it left him in a species of dazed and wondering trance, and in this condition Veronica found him with a letter in either hand.

Veronica thought to herself: "It has come at last!" and her heart gave a sudden jump, but she merely said: "Cornwall is here, Mr. John."

"*What!*" said John Henry, starting and staring about as if some presence were concealed in the room.

Veronica's heart gave a second jump, but she said: "Cornwall's coals, Mr. John; your supply is almost out."

John Henry appeared to be relieved.

"Tell him to bring in a bag," he said.

John Henry's coal inhabited a large, disguised packing-case in a far corner of the room. The coal-man, having emptied a sack thereinto, withdrew; and Veronica, having departed for a cloth, returned to remove the dust caused by the upheaval. She dusted,

and as she dusted she watched John Henry sitting in his chair, staring with great eyes at the two letters. Veronica was certain that he was on the brink of dire and devastating trouble.

"What day is this, Veronica?" he asked suddenly.

"Tuesday, Mr. John," said Veronica.

"Tuesday," repeated John Henry, staring at the second letter as if it held some dire fascination for him. "*Tuesday!*"

He rose suddenly and left the room. Veronica, following, was in time to see him pass rapidly down the street. She returned to his room, distracted, wondering what on earth she could do. She sat on her own particular chair, held her head in her hands, and thought; but the result of her thoughts was fruitless. John Henry almost caught her in this attitude when he reappeared with a telegraph form in his hand desirous of obtaining two things that had escaped his memory—his hat and a shilling to pay for the wire.

"I'm going away for a few days on Friday," he said to Veronica.

Veronica, in the extremity of her distress, ventured to ask a question.

"Where are you going?" she exclaimed fearfully, then scared at her own temerity she added: "For fear any one might call!"

"No one will—" commenced John Henry, and then stopped short, not having yet been able to abandon the hope that, some day, Little David might put in an appearance. "It is not likely that any one will call," he amended, "but I shall give you my address, and if any letters come you can send them on."

The thought of going to the Red House at Litshot, of meeting the dramatist, his daughter called Sheila, and some other relative called Muggie, all of whom appeared to be interested in his book, made John Henry quail and quiver; but Canning and Canning appeared to want it, so he wrote a telegram announcing his arrival on Friday afternoon, and he quite forgot to say by what train he would arrive. It did not occur to him that, as he had never heard of Litshot, it might be well to find out where it was. All that

occupied John Henry's mind was the certainty that if he did not telegraph at once and say he was coming, he would never go at all. The prospect scared him to death. He sent off the wire and returned home in a sad state of discomfiture greatly increased by the sharp remarks of the young lady in the post office on the subject of his name which he had forgotten to state.

The telegram reached the Red House at Litshot that same afternoon. John Henry had addressed it to "Miss Sheila Cornwall," and it was handed to that young woman at the very moment when she had settled herself in comfort to listen to the story of her friend—Mabel Canning. Sheila—she was young, pretty, daintily dressed, full of life, and happy—glanced at the telegram and slipped it unopened behind the clock on the mantel-shelf.

"That will be from one of the two Georges," she remarked. "I drove them both up to London, for a few days, because you were coming over and I wanted to hear everything without being disturbed. It can wait. Go on, my dear child. I am devoured with curiosity."

The two Georges, it may be remarked in passing, were the father of Sheila and his secretary, one George Dallas by name, a youth of four and twenty, the bastard son of an old friend, brought up by the paternal Cornwall from infancy. It should also be noted that Sheila was the senior of Mabel by fully eighteen months in point of actual time, years—according to herself—in point of experience, and several centuries—according to Mabel—in worldly wisdom, knowledge of dress, and the possession of clothes. She was the one girl friend for whom Mabel had both affection and respect. They both wanted a mother. Sheila owned an aunt. Mabel was governed by a housekeeper. The father of Sheila was poor, and always would be poor. The father of Mabel was rich, and grew richer every year. The father of Sheila stood in amused awe of what she might do next. The father of Mabel—well, you know about him. It was natural that the two girls should be fast friends, drawn together by respect on the one side,

and pity on the other. Philip Canning had been willing for his child to be friendly with the daughter of his old school friend, and his old school friend had encouraged his daughter to be kind to the child he pitied.

Mabel appeared to find it difficult to go on. She grew red in the face and she plucked the front of her dress with her fingers.

"I told you everything in my letter," she said.

"Of course you did—everything except what I wanted to know. You started by reminding me of the dance at school when you dressed up as a boy and took us all in. Then you went on to the sorrows of Emma the maid who had no boy to take her out. You explained how you went out with her for a joke and, emboldened by success, continued the practice. You described all that at length and went into the details of how you secured your outfit—most indelicate I call it. To think of a quiet little mouse like you doing such a thing! I can scarcely credit it!"

Sheila regarded her friend in puzzled wonderment, whereat Mabel looked up, and although her cheeks were flaming, the honest expression of her eyes disarmed any possible censure.

"If you had been left alone and disregarded as I have been," she said quietly, "you would have been glad to do anything."

Sheila bent forward on a sudden impulse and hugged the slender figure, kissing Mabel on the lips with vigour.

"I shall have to drag it out of you bit by bit," she said. "You never did speak of yourself. I always do all the talking. Begin where your letter commences to be vague—after Emma was dismissed."

"Emma and I went out together for about three months. We used to go to the skating rink in the town, and we went to a dance once or twice. I was supposed to be with Fammy on these occasions, and as Emma had a sister near by, it was quite simple. I became accustomed to being dressed in boy's clothes, but when Emma was dismissed I did not go out alone. It would have been different. I liked Emma, and she liked me. Father"—a sudden

hardness came over Mabel's face—"refused to give Emma a character, and it was long before she found a situation. She did eventually—in London. She wrote to me once or twice, and then one day I received a long letter from her asking me to come up to London for a couple of days. Her people were away, the cook was away, there was no one in the house but herself and the other housemaid—a nice girl who knew all about our adventures together. Emma was to meet me at the station. I was to come dressed as a boy."

Mabel was silent for a few moments in deep thought.

"Poor Emma," she said, "she was almost crazed till she received my telegram."

"Mabel Canning, *go on*, and never mind Emma," said Sheila. "You are the most irritating creature I know!"

"I went and Emma met me at the station. There is no necessity to tell you what we did, for we merely enjoyed ourselves. I disliked the other housemaid at first sight, and I was not mistaken. Emma and I went out together the first night, for we could not leave the house empty—it was large and full of valuables. The next afternoon the other girl and I went out. I did not wish to go with her, but I did not like to refuse. We did not return. She took me to the Dainty Brute."

Mabel paused and shuddered violently.

"She was not a housemaid at all. She was a thief and a bad woman. It was all an arranged plan, and they had secured me as an added piece of booty. I guessed it when I looked round the room where she left me alone. It was supposed to be her mother's flat. I tried to get out, but the door was locked. I screamed and she came and threatened to kill me if I were not silent. Then the Dainty Brute arrived with two other girls."

Mabel grew white and her face became twisted into an expression of fear and repulsion.

"He tried to kiss me!" she gasped.

"What did you do?"

"I fought. I did not know that I could fight before, but it appears I can. I bit his ear and he cried out at the pain and flung me away. He stood, holding a handkerchief to his head, but he made no attempt to kiss me again. The girls looked on and roared with laughter. He was angry, but not with me. I seemed to amuse and please him.

"They argued over what was to be done and I grew sick listening to their talk. The Dainty Brute wanted to keep me. He did not say so, but he said that I would be worth more to them if they kept me altogether. The girl, who had played the part of housemaid, objected, and accused the Dainty Brute of—of wanting me for himself. She was, I think, in love with him, and he seemed afraid of her. They argued for a long time and then they reached a decision.

"They told me that I must write to father, tell him that I had been kidnapped, and ask for a large sum of money to be sent to an address they gave. This was to be forwarded with a second letter, which I would write to their dictation, explaining what would happen if he refused, or attempted to take any measure to find me.

"You know father. I would have died rather than let him find me there, or see me dressed as a boy. I was terrified, but I refused. I told them that Emma would communicate with the police when she found that I did not return. It was a foolish thing to say, for the Dainty Brute jumped at the chance of getting the girl who had been the housemaid out of the way. He was cautious, however, and did not make much of it, merely saying that Emma's suspicions might be allayed with advantage. The girl could go out presently, telephone to her, and explain that I was going straight to the station. I had to be home that night so the tale would be feasible."

"They gave me paper and ink and left me alone for an hour. I examined the room, trying to find a means of escape, but there were none. The one window was shuttered, barred, and padlocked.

The carpet was thick and would muffle any sound. They came back and I had written nothing. I said that I would not write, and the girl wanted to force me to do so, but the Dainty Brute intervened and suggested leaving me alone till I came to my senses. They left the room and I could hear an argument going on in the passage between the girl and the man. He was trying to convince her that he had no interest in me apart from money, and I think he succeeded; but she would not let him remain behind. They went out together."

Mabel paused and glanced at her friend with gratitude.

"I was afraid you would laugh and call me a fool," she said humbly. "That is why I was unwilling to speak."

Sheila made no response other than a second and more vigorous hug added to an exhortation to continue.

"It seemed to me that I was left alone in that room for days. There was no method of telling the time, for there was no light except the light of the lamps, and they had taken everything from me. There was a fire and a large bucket of coal, and I kept stoking the fire for no obvious reason. I was dazed and did not know what to think or do. I could hear voices in the adjoining rooms, but I was too scared to cry out. There were men . . . it was a horrible place.

"They returned. The girl was furious when she found that I had not written. She told me that she had telephoned to Emma, that Emma, without giving her a chance to speak, had begged her to take me straight to the station because, on going over the house, she had missed many valuables and was unwilling to notify the police till I had gone. Poor Emma was doing her best for me, but it was not comforting at the moment. I refused to write a single word. They tried threats—all sorts of threats—and the girl struck me; but I remained firm. They went to the door and talked in whispers, and I knew that the man was outlining a plan. The girl came back and said that they would leave me till morning, and if I had not written by then I would

be sorry for it. I was not afraid of her, but I was afraid of the man, for I felt certain that he would return by himself.

"He did, but I was prepared for him. You remember I had built up the fire. Well, after they left I was wondering in a frenzied fashion what I could do, and I fell to poking the fire. That gave me an idea. The poker was large and heavy. I buried it deep in the hot coals and kept it there. Then I drew a stool up to the hearth and sat—waiting. The noise of talk and laughter—horrid laughter—went on for ages, and then it died down and the place was still. All this time I had been straining to hear the steps of the Dainty Brute, and every time some one passed the door I thought he was coming. I was half mad with terror, but I kept repeating to myself what I must do. Then an appalling thing happened. The light went out. The room was in darkness except for the glow of the fire. He—I knew he had done it—had turned off the light at the main switch. Then I knew that I would not have to wait long.

"Presently I heard a creaking in the passage and the door opened. He came in and spoke in a whisper. I could see him quite distinctly, for he was in his night attire. He asked me to keep quiet, promised to leave the door unlocked so that I could escape, said he would not make any trouble afterwards, swore to all this so long as I would talk quietly with him for a little. I did not answer and he came nearer. He came quite close and then I pulled out the poker and thrust it at his legs. I barely touched him, for he leapt back, but it must have hurt badly, for he swore, and cursed, and danced, but all very quietly. He had no wish to waken the others.

"He made a second attempt to approach me, but I said that if he came nearer I would burn his eyes out. I would, too. You have no idea how fierce I was. I would not have believed it myself. I suppose I was half mad with fear. He grew annoyed, and scared, and went away cursing and using the most terrible expressions. I was left alone. I did not sleep. I could not

have slept for the fire was dying down, and there were no more coals! You have no idea of what it was like."

"My dear," said Sheila, "I have a better understanding of the position than you have yourself. It was too dreadful for words."

"I must have fallen into a doze, for I remember thinking that the fire was black out, and then I found myself standing in terror with the poker in my hands. There was a row going on in the next room. I could hear the voice of the girl, shrill with anger. The light went on, and, while I was blinking in the sudden glare, the door opened and the girl looked in. 'Come in here, you damned liar,' she shouted. 'She has the poker still in her hands!' She had been asking the Dainty Brute for an explanation of the burn on his leg.

"The Dainty Brute came in and glared at me sullenly. 'I swear that I have not touched her,' he said. 'I did not have a chance. I have no wish to touch her. She has been more trouble than she is worth.' All this time I stood grasping the poker and staring at them in a dazed, stupid fashion. 'Will you leave her to me?' asked the girl, and he gave his consent willingly, adding a few words to the effect that he wished he had never set eyes on me.

The girl snatched the poker from my hand and thrust me back into a chair. She drew up the table and set paper before me. 'I give you ten minutes to write,' she said and swept out of the room, driving the Dainty Brute before her.

"She was in a fury of jealousy and, I think, would have been disappointed if I had written. She was back again under the time, and when she found that I had done nothing, she called on the Dainty Brute. He came, and when I saw a cane in his hand I cowered back in the chair and shivered. To do him justice I think it was distasteful and he struck the chair as often as he struck me, but he had no choice. 'Leave her face alone,' said the girl. 'It will be worth money to us.' I cried out for mercy, but she merely laughed, and when the man commenced to stop, she snatched the cane from him and plied it herself. It was then that I commenced

to suffer, but I preferred to be beaten to the thought of facing father. I said so, and I also said that if they made any attempt to approach him, I would refuse to go home. They might kill me if they pleased.

"They left me alone after that for hours, or it may have been but a short time. I do not know. I was demented and quite incapable of judging. Then the girl came back and made me straighten my attire and wipe my face. She said that they were going to take me to a house where I would receive a lot of attention—from men. I fell on my knees and begged for mercy, but she merely struck me across the face. I have never seen any one so possessed with fury. I do not wonder that the Dainty Brute was afraid.

"They half led, half carried me down to a closed car, thrust me in, and followed themselves. We sat on the back seat. I between them, each holding an arm. I had given myself up for lost when the car stopped suddenly, the door opened, and a policeman looked in. Instinctively they loosened their grasp. I took advantage of the instance and was out of the other door, and away, dodging under the wheels of the traffic. The policeman had opened the door to ask where the car was going. The road was up, and the chauffeur—fortunately for me—had fallen foul of the driver of a lorry.

"I had no idea where I was, but I ran hard and gained a quiet street, and there the Dainty Brute overtook me. He held me by the scruff of the neck, but I screamed and struggled, and a crowd gathered. To look at he seems a gentlemen of means. He spoke to the crowd and no one interfered. I was too scared and dazed to say anything, although I begged to be freed in a frenzied fashion, and if it had not been for a gentleman who stopped right in front of me, I might have been lost forever."

"Yes!" said Sheila expectantly.

"That is all," said Mabel. "There is nothing more to tell. The gentleman took me to Fammy and here I am."

Sheila appeared to be both puzzled and unsatisfied. She sat frowning at Mabel in a thoughtful fashion, and that young person—she looked exceedingly prim by the way—seemed slightly agitated; the result, no doubt, of the recounting of her trials.

“Surely there is more to tell,” said Sheila. “What happened to Emma the maid for example?”

Mabel became a picture of penitence.

“I sent her a telegram the next day. It was terrible, but I forgot about her entirely till early the next morning. After speaking to the girl, she informed the police of the theft. They came and that kept her busy for a time, but, when the girl did not return, then Emma grew alarmed about me. She almost went crazy wondering if I were safe. She had said nothing to the police about me, and so her tongue was tied. It was very fortunate that it was. No one blamed her for the theft—luckily for herself.”

“You say that this man took you to Fammy’s! How did he take you there, and what did he say when he discovered you were a girl?”

“He did not say anything,” said Mabel. “He saw that I was in trouble—scared to death, and took me to—as he imagined—my people. He was a nice man.”

“He must have been,” said Sheila, still exceedingly puzzled. “Do you mean to say that he just walked away with you under his arm—like a parcel, for example?”

“We went in a cab to Paddington and then on to—to Fammy’s,” said Mabel somewhat hurriedly. “I was completely unnerved, as you might imagine, and frightened of everything.”

“You were lucky to find a man who would act like that!”

“I was,” said Mabel with fervour. “I told him nothing.”

“What was he like? Was he old, or middle-aged?” pursued Sheila.

“He was not so old as father,” said Mabel with reserve, “and

how can I tell you what he was like? He was a man. I was too much upset to think coherently about anything."

Sheila arose suddenly and seemed to discard thoughts that disturbed her. She clasped Mabel in her arms with affection, but she shook her vigorously at the same time.

"You poor child!" she said. "No wonder you had to tell someone, and no wonder you did not explain the matter in detail to Fammy. She would have felt impelled to throw out dark hints to your father. You are more than fortunate to be safe and well, and yourself with no mishaps. You will never want to go out as a boy again—that is one excellent result."

"Never!" said Mabel with emphasis. "At least—no, not ever!"

The puzzled frown returned to the face of Sheila, and she seemed about to ask a question. Muggie—she was a widowed sister of George Cornwall and her name was Alice Muggins—entering at this moment to hurry the girls in to dinner, Sheila remained silent. She appeared to be thinking, however, and the result of her thoughts produced a question which she put to Mabel while her aunt was busy with the joint of beef.

"When you left London was it morning or afternoon?"

"Early in the evening," said Mabel, without pausing to think.

After dinner Sheila consulted a time-table. Now to reach Crompton where Fammy lived, it is necessary to leave London before two o'clock—that is if the entire journey is to be performed by train. Buses ply between Tipping Horley, Litshot, and Crompton; but an early evening train from London would arrive at Tipping Horley long after the last bus had left.

Sheila continued to think, so much so in fact that John Henry's telegram lay behind the clock in the sitting-room entirely forgotten. She was still thinking as she sat up in bed and watched Mabel slowly commencing to undress—the two girls shared the same room, and her thoughts appeared to disturb her. She shook them off, however, and she saw how pensive and sad Mabel's

expression was; and, when she had done that completely, she remembered about the telegram.

"I have forgotten the wire," she said. "Run down and bring it up like a dear girl. You are still fairly decent in point of dress."

Mabel did so.

"Read it out to me," said Sheila, nestling luxuriously in the bed-clothes. "I hope it is nothing important."

Mabel read: "Miss Sheila Cornwall, Red House, Litshot. Many thanks. Shall arrive Friday afternoon."

Mabel said: "Oh! What is he coming here for?" and sat down suddenly on the foot of Sheila's bed while her face grew dead white.

Sheila sat up and snatched the telegram from her hand.

"John Henry Millman!" she said. "So he *is* coming. Do *you* know him?"

"That is the man who took me from the Dainty Brute," said Mabel, and her face became violently red.

Sheila leapt out of bed and shook her friend with energy.

"You little wretch," she said. "You have not told me all your story. She was so frightened, forsooth, that she was unable to observe the man, but she recognises his name! Go on, miss! Tell the John Henry Millman part, or I shall shake it out of you."

"Let me get into bed first of all," said Mabel diffidently, as she stood a slender white figure with a flaming face.

Sheila groaned.

"If it is necessary—by all means," she said icily.

Mabel crept into bed and commenced to tell the John Henry Millman part of her story. They were still talking about it when the cocks commenced to crow, and Sheila—she was a kind-hearted little soul—held Mabel in her arms. Mabel, I might venture to state without straying far from the truth, had wept a few odd tears after the telling of the tale. Sheila, while being kind-hearted, was also exceedingly feminine. This was clearly indicated by a

remark she uttered after they had both composed themselves to sleep.

"She never wants to be Little David again," she said solemnly. "Never—oh no, not ever!"

Mabel made no direct reply to this remark, but a long time afterwards she said:

"Don't be a beast, Sheila. Your father has always loved you, and so have George and your aunt. I have had no one but Fammy, and she is far away."

Sheila snored in a distinct but delicate fashion. She was having her revenge for Mabel's reservation in the matter of the John Henry Millman part of the story. She continued her revenge during the earlier part of the succeeding morning, but by noon it showed signs of lessening, and by the early afternoon it had entirely disappeared. She was exceedingly curious as to what manner of man John Henry Millman might be, and her curiosity was not satisfied by the descriptions she had received overnight. Mabel, who had arisen from bed pale and contrite and continued in this state all day, stealing appealing glances from time to time at the face of her friend, stood by the window of the sitting-room, gazing sadly into the garden. Sheila grasped her from behind, whirled her round, kissed her, and plumped her down on the sofa.

"Tell me what he is like, you great baby!" she commanded.

"He is not so tall as George," said Mabel, "but he is not short. He is very strong—stronger than George, of that I am certain. He has a very beautiful face but he is not good-looking. What I mean is his eyes look at you very nicely, and when he smiles he seems to wrap you round in a rug—no, I do not mean that. I mean——"

Sheila interrupted.

"Mad!" she said. "Stark, staring, mad! The girl is raving! Stronger than George, forsooth! A beautiful face but not good-looking! A man who can wrap up a girl in a rug by looking at her with his eyes! The girl is a lunatic!"

"You know what I mean," said Mabel diffidently.

"I do," said Sheila nodding. "You mean that you have fallen head over heels in love with the man."

"I have not," said Mabel with conviction in her voice. "I most certainly have not. I have no wish to be in love with any man. I have never been in love and——"

"Then you ought to have done so, and as you usually do what is expected of you, you have," said Sheila with unanswerable logic.

"No," repeated Mabel, "I have not done that, but I like him very much. I felt then, and I feel now, that I could go up to him and tell him anything and he would understand and ask no questions. I would just speak and he would listen and tell me what to do."

"She is not in love with him, oh no!" said Sheila in tones of exasperation.

"I am *not*," said Mabel, and she stamped her foot on the floor.

"Do you want to see him again?"

"I do—most decidedly."

"As Mabel Canning?"

"Oh no!" said Mabel in great distress.

"As Little David?"

"Oh—no," said Mabel in a hesitating fashion.

Sheila groaned.

"You had better stay on with us over the week-end," she said. "It will be better for you to meet him here than in your father's house."

Mabel arose in great excitement.

"Does father know him also?" she asked. "He must not see me there!"

"My dear child, do you mean to tell me that you do not know what he is? He writes books—charming books—and your father is publishing one of them. He thinks no end of Millman's work—from the point of view of profit, and he will assuredly ask him to his house one of these fine days. He has asked my father to have

him here with the intention of chaining him to his publishing firm. Father is going to advise on a dramatization of his story."

Mabel appeared to be greatly distressed.

"How terrible!" she said. "He must not see me at home. He might recognise me and then he would know that I was a girl."

"You do not want him to know that?"

"No," said Mabel with assurance. "At least—no."

Sheila waved her hands in a gesture of despair.

"He might speak to father," said Mabel. "He might be angry, too, and that might make him dislike me."

Sheila rose with determination and went towards the door.

"This matter is beyond me," she said. "We want the help of a man. I am going to wire for the younger George. He is not doing anything special in London and can return at once. I shall say that I have broken my leg. He will not believe it, but it will bring him back by the first train."

It did. The younger George was a tall, handsome boy, clever, but not over-burdened with brains. He had a fresh, good-humoured face, two merry black eyes, and he adored the ground that Sheila Cornwall trod on. She, it may be remarked, had a regard for the ground he trod on, but she never mentioned the fact. They had grown up together as boy and girl. They understood each other, and each believed that they had been specially made for the other. No one else shared this view, unfortunately; the rest of the Cornwall family, and all their friends, refused to listen to what either of them had to say on the matter. They laughed when George threw out tentative hints, and said that he was talking nonsense. Neither of them deserved to be taken seriously—that was the general opinion. It was the one cloud on the lives of both Sheila and George, and it was a cloud of some magnitude. George was a decent lad. It was not possible for him—with the bar of his illegitimacy—to force an alliance with the family that had done everything for him. Sheila, conscious of this and of her father's objection, respected his silence.

"My hat!" said the younger George, after he had listened to an abridged and much expurgated version of the story of Mabel Canning, and he regarded that young person with round and astonished eyes.

"If you have no other suggestion to offer," said Sheila shortly, "you had better go back to London. My hat indeed!"

"Give a fellow a chance, Sheila," remonstrated the penitent one. "It is rather a shock to think of little Mabel Canning going about dressed as a boy."

"Men," said Sheila, "are idiots. I wonder why we women tolerate them!"

"Half a second," said George. "You have not told me what you want my advice about. You have only told me the story."

They placed the matter before him—at least Sheila did. Mabel did not wish John Henry to see her. He might arrive any day at her father's house. On the other hand she must see him because it would be wise to prevent any chance of the escapade coming to the ears of Philip Canning, also there were many other reasons which it was quite unnecessary to state. George faced this perplexing problem with a frown, for a few moments, and then his face cleared. He said:

"Well, go home and come back here as Little David. You run no risk in our house. It will be a great lark!"

"That is an idea," said Sheila thoughtfully.

"I could never do it," said Mabel, blushing hotly.

"Why not? You have done it before," said George, who was a man and foolish.

"That was different," said both Mabel and Sheila at one and the same time, "quite different."

George failed to see this, but he was quelled by the finality of both their voices. The idea appealed to him, however, and he grew quite enthusiastic about it. The two girls listened, allowed themselves to be persuaded, and finally gave way. They entered

into a discussion of the plan with gusto, and very soon the main details were fixed.

"Remember," said Sheila, when they had arrived at this point, "it was your idea!"

"Yes, he thought of it first," said Mabel diffidently.

The plan suddenly appeared to George in an entirely fresh aspect. He grew serious, but a twinkle showed in his eyes. He also made some irrelevant and muttered remark to the effect that girls were the devil. He ruminated for a time, and then he startled the pair by an amended decision.

"All right," he said, "since it *is* my idea, I shall tell you what to do. This man arrives here in the afternoon. Mabel can go home in the morning and so she will not see him, or he see her. We shall see him, however, and Sheila and I can judge whether it is wise for him to see Little David again or not. I may be a fool, but Sheila is not. If it is considered wise, then we can 'phone for Mabel to come over. If it is considered unwise, we can 'phone and tell her so. The decision lies in the lap of the gods. It all hangs on the man."

"Carried unanimously," said Sheila. "Come into the garden, George, I want to show you the new arch for the roses."

"You wise man," she said, when they were out of sight of the windows, and she kissed him on the cheek.

George glowed, but he left her alone. He was a decent boy, George, and he loved Sheila and wished to continue to live in the same house with her, even though everybody refused to credit his own feelings in the matter.

"I must tell you all about it," said Sheila.

She did—or rather she did not, but she gave him a fuller description, including an imagined sketch of the character of John Henry Millman, and an indication of the state of strain between Mabel and her father. George listened in silence, and when she had finished he spoke, but he passed no opinion.

"We must wait and see the man," he said. "He might be a rotter. We have only her word to go by. Not that I disbelieve what she has said—far from it. I like his book and if he resembles it, well and good. He may not, however; of that we must judge for ourselves."

George had a second brain-wave on Thursday morning.

"Does he know what station to come to, and what is his train?" he asked.

"If it is Millman you are talking about," said George Cornwall, who had just returned from London, "for goodness sake write him a letter. He must be treated with respect. According to Canning and Canning—your father's firm, my dear—he is a man of great irritability and very much on his dignity. They are afraid of losing him, and we must not be at fault. I am too poor to risk anything of that nature."

Sheila laughed at Mabel's discomfited face. They were seated at lunch. George Cornwall—from experience—cast a scared glance at his daughter, and from her to young George, and finally he looked at Mabel with some curiosity.

"You young people appear amused," he said uneasily. "I hope you have no wild scheme in your heads. I must ask you to restrain yourself, Sheila; in fact you had better leave Millman alone and let me deal with him. If you startle, or put him out, I shall be extremely annoyed. I shall have to meet the train myself and bring him over."

"All right, daddy," said Sheila. "We shall be very nice and quiet. Mabel is going home in the morning, so she will not be here to worry Mr. Millman."

"I am not afraid of Mabel," said George Cornwall, "but I am afraid of you. I can remember strange things happening on divers occasions, and I am nervous—decidedly nervous. I expect both you and George to agree with every word he utters—and to keep your own mouths shut. When you write that letter—you have written him once, so you had better do it—tell him to travel first-

class. There is a fair on at the junction and the trains will be packed to suffocation."

They sent John Henry a letter telling him to book to Tipping Horley, the nearest station to Litshot; they indicated the one and only through train; and they remembered to state the necessity of travelling first-class. The letter, as you might imagine, startled John Henry exceedingly. He was disturbed at the necessity of travelling first-class, and he was completely taken by surprise at the thought of arriving at Tipping Horley. Veronica, watching him depart, was assured more than ever that disaster lay before him. She went to his room, after his figure had disappeared round the corner of the street, and, throwing her apron over her head, relieved her feelings in a copious burst of tears. After that she examined the address which John Henry had written down on an odd piece of paper; and the Red House seemed to her to be a fitting spot for a tragedy. Veronica was distracted.

The inhabitants of the Red House awaited the time of John Henry's arrival with interest, foreboding, and some excitement. Mabel had departed and so her feelings cannot be described. George Cornwall—he was short, inclined to stoutness, and of a good-natured, jolly disposition—was unsettled and anxious. Sheila and George were vividly interested and exceedingly curious. Muggie was affected by the general impression of excitement in the air and somewhat confused in consequence. The Red House—it was whitewashed, by the way, but no matter—was small and greatly in need of repairs. The furnishings were old, and shabby, and rather untidy. The dishes were of a harlequin-like variety, and the one and only maid-servant was small and apt to breathe hard in moments of emotion. She was in a state of emotion at the moment, having been chivied and harried to an unusual and surprising extent in a great effort to make everything appear fresh, and new, and spotlessly clean. Even the car—a most disreputable-looking Ford—had received a much required washing down.

Three-quarters of an hour before the train was due young George

ran this vehicle out of the shed where it lived and brought it groaning to the front door. Ten minutes later George Cornwall—looking very spruce in a worn but well-brushed suit of tweeds—emerged from the door, while the entire family hovered in the background to watch him start. A suspicious twinkle lurked in the eyes of both Sheila and George, and this Muggie perceived, for she gave vent to a startled yet seemingly resigned sigh.

George Cornwall was a timid driver. He hated motors and everything mechanical. He started the engine, took his seat, waved to the group on the doorstep, and turned the wheel preparatory to passing down the short drive. He turned the steering-wheel, but the wheels of the car remained immovable.

"George!" he said in a voice of agony. "The wretched steering-gear has gone wrong. You must drive for me."

The car, by the way, was a two-seater which could take three at a pinch.

"I am afraid I cannot do that," said George seriously. "I hurt my wrist this morning, and it might be dangerous if the steering-gear proved troublesome."

George Cornwall sat in the car a picture of desolation.

"What on earth are we to do?" he asked helplessly.

"I shall have to drive," said Sheila, with the twinkle absolutely gone from her eyes.

"But if he is a fat man there will not be room for the three of us," said her father. "He will be squeezed to death!"

"Then I must go by myself," said Sheila.

"If I thought you would act in a seemly fashion," said her father, "it would be the better course to follow, but how can I tell? You might shock him at the outset and give a bad impression. He might be afraid to let you drive. You look so irresponsible!"

"To say such things, of your own daughter, too," said Sheila in mock horror. "I promise, daddy, to be as quiet as a mouse."

"I am thin," said George eagerly. "I can go with Sheila, and

if Millman is fat I can sit at their feet. He will feel more at ease with a man in the car."

George Cornwall descended from his perch and although he seemed unhappy, he also seemed greatly relieved.

"It is fate, I suppose," he said in a resigned voice. "For goodness sake be careful and do not have an accident."

Sheila climbed in and George followed at her heels. The steering-gear—in some miraculous fashion—after a little tinkering acted as steering-gears are supposed to act, and the car moved away.

"I wonder—!" said George Cornwall to his sister, but Muggie hurried into the house and left him wondering. She, wise woman, did not wonder at all.

"I hate playing a trick on daddy," said Sheila to George, as they sped along the road, "but I just had to meet this man. I want to see him before he sees us."

She had a very good opportunity of doing this.

The trains which stop at Tipping Horley are long, but they carry few first-class passengers, only one first-class coach, and this is invariably in the front of the train. Sheila and George took up a favourable position on the platform and waited. The one and only porter—the very same porter that John Henry had spoken to—was in evidence, and he looked at them with animosity.

"He is a new man," said Sheila, "and very uncivil. He lives, I believe, at some distance from Tipping Horley in the country on the other side from Litshot. At least so some one told me."

"He is very old to be working," said George. "I wonder they do not pension him off."

The train being signalled, at that moment, he ceased to wonder. They waited expectantly, and presently it steamed in. They had taken up their position with accuracy. The first-class coach was directly in front of them, and from one of the carriages a young man emerged. He carried a suit-case in one hand on which they both saw the words "John Henry Millman" painted in white, and

in the other hand he held a bundle done up in a large red and white handkerchief. He was tall, and thin, and emaciated. His face was the colour of parchment, and he seemed feeble—brittle almost—like a dry reed that might snap but will not bend. His eyes were dark, coal black in colour, sunk deep in his head, and his expression was pitifully and touchingly wistful. He looked like a wasted shadow of youth. He did not glance at the two young people but walked away from them, placed the suit-case on the platform, and stood beside it like a lost soul.

Sheila grasped George's arm and clung to him in a sudden panic.

"That must be Millman. There is no one else, and the name is on his case!" said George in a horrified whisper.

"It cannot be," said Sheila. "Poor little Mabel!"

Very few people had descended from the train. The youth was the only first-class passenger. They watched the people pass out of the station without stirring from where they stood, and not one soul bore the faintest sign of being a possible John Henry Millman. The youth with the suit-case was the one remaining person except for the ancient porter struggling with some cases at the far end by the guard's van. George pulled Sheila along as the train steamed out of the station. They went slowly, for, to tell the truth, they were loath to speak to the young man. Before they had time to reach him, however, he commenced to walk away with eager, feeble steps; and he left the suit-case on the platform.

"Good heavens!" said George, and halted in dismay.

The ancient porter, abandoning his task, had come running forward. He met the youth and, without a word, clasped him in his arms. The action was rough and simple, but it expressed an infinity of meaning.

"Welcome home, lad," he said quietly. "I am glad to see you."

"Uncle, they have told me that I am going—home," said the boy, and the meaning of his words was clearly apparent by the medium of his quivering voice.

"Don't say that, lad, don't say it," said the ancient porter, and

his voice was a revelation of gentleness. "Harry has come over with Peter Toomy's cart. He is waiting outside. We are all waiting to welcome you back. You must be brave for the sake of your mother."

"I will try uncle, but—it is hard," said the boy. "It is mortal hard," and his voice broke on a sob.

"I know that," said the ancient porter, "and I kept your mother from coming to the station on purpose. You will be smiling by the time you reach the cottage. I know you will."

He took the youth by the hand like a child and led him out of the station.

"George! He must be dying," said Sheila, and she flung herself into his ready arms.

In this fashion they failed to see the approach of John Henry Millman who had emerged from the rear of the train, and, recognising his old friend the porter, had disappeared from sight into the guard's van to assist him in his labours. John Henry, who had witnessed the meeting of the ancient porter and the youth and heard their conversation, had a suspicious brightness in his eyes; but that was of no consequence. He also, as it happened, had entirely forgotten the reason for his presence on the platform at Tipping Horley; and that was of no consequence either.

The sight of George and Sheila stayed John Henry's steps and he paused to look at them with admiration. The thought which crossed his mind was that here was a pleasing spectacle for sore eyes to look at, and this was reflected on his face. He stood, considering them in a detached and impartial manner, and he smiled as he did so in a very engaging fashion. Sheila, freeing herself from George, perceived him in the middle of this smile.

"That is our man. I am certain of it," she whispered.

She advanced, dragging George after her, and held out her hand.

"Mr. John Henry Millman!" she said eagerly.

"That is my name," said John Henry, rather astonished, but still sufficiently detached to remain smiling and easy.

"I am Sheila Cornwall and this is George," said Sheila. "We have come to meet you. The car is outside."

"Bless my soul!" said John Henry considerably taken aback. "Of course, I had forgotten. I am coming to stay with you."

Sheila and George exchanged glances, and whether they both had the same thought is hard to say, but they both seemed pleased.

"Is this your case?" inquired George, seizing it.

"It is," said John Henry and he paused, appeared to be in doubt for a moment, and then looking at Sheila asked a question. "Excuse me," he said, "I must know at once. This gentleman's name is not George Cornwall by any chance?"

"George Dallas," explained Sheila, blushing very prettily. "My name is Cornwall."

"Then that is all right," said John Henry, and he heaved a sigh of relief. "I had a sudden and terrible thought that you might be brother and sister."

George and Sheila, for no obvious reason, for John Henry's words were vague and peculiar, seized him one by either arm as if they had known him for years, and hurried him out of the station to the car.

"You come in next, Mr. Millman," said Sheila, after she was seated at the wheel. "We are all thin and can squeeze in quite comfortably."

John Henry was about to comply when a touch on the arm made him turn around. The ancient porter, sour of face no longer, stood there with his cap in his hand.

"I want a word with you, sir," he said in a husky, quivering voice.

"Certainly," said John Henry. "You must excuse me for one second," he added, turning to Sheila. "I shall not keep you waiting long."

The ancient porter moved away out of earshot from the car and nearer to where, in a rough farm cart, the youth who had descended from the first-class carriage was seated.

"I want to thank you for your kindness to my lad there," he said. "He wants to thank you too. He has been very ill and the doctors have sent him back to us because—they fear he is going home. He might have been gone by now, if he had travelled down in one of these crowded carriages. We are poor, you see, and could afford nothing better."

"You remember that you told me why you had returned to work," said John Henry gently. "There is no necessity for you to say anything at all. You must not thank me." He drew a packet of thin white paper from his pocket and commenced to write. "This is my address," he continued "and I have put my name down also. I want you to let me know how the boy gets on, and if there is anything I can do you must tell me at once. Then it is I who will have to thank you."

He detached a couple of sheets from the packet which he crushed carelessly into his pocket, folded them—they were folded once in any case—slipped the paper into the old man's hand, and hurried over to the cart.

"You are going to let me know how you get on," he said to the boy, and he refused to listen to his broken words of thanks. "I shall not say good-bye for we shall meet again some day."

The ancient porter stood, where John Henry had left him, staring at the paper in his hand; thin, fine, white paper that crackled and rustled to the touch. He caught John Henry's sleeve as he was hurrying back to the car and his voice was urgent and full of entreaty.

"I can't take it, sir. I didn't go to beg for money—least of all from you. You must take this back!"

"If I were a rich man, yes, you might say that to me," said John Henry, "but I am not. I am poor, like yourself, and it is the privilege of the poor to help one another. You will not be so unkind as to make me take it back, and then my address is there."

He broke away from the old man and, gaining the car, stepped inside in a great hurry.

"I'm very sorry to have kept you waiting," said John Henry, and then he used his handkerchief with vigour, muttering at the same time some strange statement about dust in his eyes and throat.

George started the engine and got in; Sheila drove away; and none of them uttered a word. John Henry continued to be troubled by the dust in his eyes and throat; but when they approached the Black Bull and actually stopped at the door, then he appeared to have completely got rid of the disturbing substance.

"I have a great regard for the Black Bull," said John Henry in some excitement. "A friend of my own lives there. He is the odd man and a very nice fellow indeed. He was most kind to me on the only other occasion when I was in Tipping Horley."

"There is a telephone inside," said Sheila to George, "and if you have any doubt about what you have to say don't ever speak to me again. It is a friend who is very anxious to hear from us," she explained to John Henry. "George will be back in a few moments."

Sheila, who was mischievous, might have returned to the subject of John Henry's previous visit to Tipping Horley, but she preferred to ask him a question instead.

"Why did you want to know if George was my brother?" she asked, and her cheeks grew a trifle red.

John Henry regarded her closely, for a moment, and then his face grew grave.

"Because when I saw you two standing on the platform, I thought to myself: 'These two beautiful young creatures are just made, cut out for each other'—so I had to ask. I wanted to find out, too, if you had made the discovery for yourselves. Young people are so apt to be blind and foolish. You, thank goodness, are not."

Sheila, with a total lack of maidenly reserve, flung both arms round John Henry's neck and kissed him full on the lips. George, emerging from the inn, was a startled witness to this scandalous outburst. His astonished face appeared at John Henry's elbow as that gentleman was recovering his composure.

"I don't care," said Sheila defiantly. "He has just said that when he saw us on the platform, he saw we were made, cut out for each other; and the solemn way he said it would make anybody believe it true."

"But it is," objected John Henry.

George entered the car and seized both John Henry's hands.

"You are the first person, except ourselves, to either see or say it," he said with enthusiasm, and he almost broke John Henry's knuckles. "There is a reason why I cannot force them to believe it true," he added in an altered voice that failed to reach the ears of Sheila. "I shall tell you later on."

John Henry learnt this reason that same night, but he made no attempt to help the young people. Happiness, John Henry believed, seldom lay beyond the doorway of an unwilling consent, and he sensed the fact that both George Cornwall and Muggie—possibly without thinking seriously of the matter—objected to the idea of such a marriage for Sheila. John Henry, however, made a mental note of the matter and determined to bear it in mind. He was, at any time, an odd creature.

"I'm glad we telephoned before he told me that," said Sheila to George, as the car sped along the road.

"So am I," said George to Sheila.

John Henry, mystified, remained silent. Also he had suddenly recalled the fact that he was bound on a solemn visit directly connected with Canning and Canning, and his heart turned to water at the thought of the dramatist who had read his book and wished to discuss it. The two young people were aware that something had happened to him. Poor Sheila put it down to her kiss, while George imagined that he had injured John Henry's knuckles beyond repair. In this fashion John Henry arrived at the door of the Red House in a dignified silence; and, descending, was delivered by the two young people to his host who had been standing, for some time past, anxiously listening for the sound of the car.

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID AGAIN APPEARS

JOHN HENRY was nervous. George Cornwall was oppressed with a certainty that Sheila had done something terrible; and Muggie was deeply conscious that the worst hole in the carpet showed beside John Henry's feet. They sat in the constrained atmosphere created by forced conversation, and the maid, bringing in the tea, placed the tray on the table with a crash that made them all jump. There was an awkward pause and two more silent members were added to the company in the persons of George and Sheila.

George Cornwall made an attempt to speak of John Henry's book, but John Henry, retiring within himself, remained adamant. Muggie rushing gallantly into the breach with tea and cakes, matters eased a little, but a second and even more distressing pause ensued. Again Muggie intervened, and this time her words were spontaneous.

"Whatever is that on the sofa?" she asked.

"That is Mr. Millman's overcoat," said Sheila seriously.

"My coat," said John Henry, half rising up and then sitting down again. "Did I bring it in here? I am very sorry."

"I brought it in," said Sheila.

The Cornwall family, with the exception of young George, became lost in a well of despair.

"Why did you bring Mr. Millman's coat in here?" asked Muggie, not because she wanted to know, but because she felt impelled to say something.

"Because Mr. Millman is here," said Sheila with great serious-

ness. "I thought it best that it should be in the same room with him."

John Henry, already afflicted with nerves, had a vision of being haunted by a garment from which it was impossible to escape.

"That is very good of you," he said, "but I think it might be left outside."

George Cornwall found his voice and it sounded stern and annoyed.

"What is all this nonsense? Why have you brought the coat in here?"

"Ask Mr. Millman what is in the right outside pocket," said Sheila solemnly.

"The right outside pocket," repeated poor John Henry, who was in the habit of carrying strange articles on his person. "The right—" he paused suddenly and turned to Sheila with a glance of comprehension. "Oh!" he said profoundly. "I understand. That was very thoughtful of you, but it would be quite safe anywhere in this house."

"What is it?" asked Muggie, who was a curious soul.

"All the money I possess in the world," said John Henry, "and not very much at that. I stuffed the notes in there by mistake and Miss Sheila must have seen me do it."

"Miss Sheila did not, but Sheila did," said that young woman in a voice of correction.

John Henry looked at her and smiled, and then he turned to George Cornwall.

"You know," he said, "I entirely forgot till I was near your door what I had come here for. I felt quite at home; in fact I felt as if I had known these two beautiful creatures all my life. They welcomed me so kindly at the station. People, of late, have been very good to me indeed."

George Cornwall leant back in his chair with a sigh of relief, and Muggie deliberately engulfed a small cookie at a single gulp.

The Cornwall family, as you might say, looked round and smiled on John Henry and on itself.

"I was right. It was a mixture of nerves and father," said Sheila to George.

"You are always right," said George to Sheila.

"We have all been scared to death of you," they said in chorus to John Henry.

"Scared of me!" said John Henry in genuine amazement. "What an extraordinary idea! Whatever for?"

"Not scared, exactly," said George Cornwall with a laugh, "nervous is the better word. You have impressed Canning and Canning with respect, Mr. Millman, and they gave me the most stringent instructions not to offend your dignity, nor arouse your irritable temper. They want to keep you and I do not blame them. Your work is of value, but I cannot quite understand how they failed so signally to estimate your character."

"I can," said Sheila fiercely.

"Be quiet, my dear," said her father. "I know what you are going to say and you must not say it. My daughter thinks my poor efforts have not gained sufficient recognition," he explained to John Henry, "and she refused to lay the blame where it is due—at my own door."

John Henry paid no attention. He was lost in a species of wondering trance. For weeks he had thought that Canning and Canning disliked, and wished to get rid both of him and his work. He had been assured of this and profoundly depressed in consequence. The discovery that the matter stood the other way round filled him with astonishment, and he failed to fathom how this amazing state of affairs could have come into existence. Then, quite suddenly, he commenced to laugh.

"Excuse me," he said, "but it is so funny—so funny and yet so extremely natural. I kept Canning and Canning waiting for an hour one day. I had an appointment, went there, and subsequently forgot all about it. I was scared stiff when I remembered, so

scared that it was impossible for me to explain or apologize. They were annoyed so I just said nothing. I have avoided the place as much as possible for I thought they regretted having had anything to do with me."

George Cornwall gave vent to a laugh of deep enjoyment.

"Such treatment from an unknown author must have shaken Canning and Canning to the core," he chuckled. "I expect they gave you a rotten agreement and thought some other publisher had secured your interest. You must leave the matter as it is. Without doubt you were born under a lucky star."

"To think," said John Henry, following his own thoughts and speaking aloud, "that this arises from the afternoon which seemed to me, at the time, to be the worst I had ever spent!"

"What were you doing?" asked Sheila with interest.

"I had been looking for a man called the Dainty Brute for weeks," said John Henry abruptly, "and when I entered Canning and Canning's office he was seated there. He ran away, and I ran after him. I wanted to find out about a boy I know, and he seemed to be the only person who could tell me anything. He got away, however, by kicking me on the ankle; but it all took time."

Sheila and George exchanged startled glances.

"What was he doing in Canning and Canning's office?" asked Sheila unexpectedly.

"Sitting on a chair and smiling at his boots," said John Henry in the same absent fashion. "He has not been back, unfortunately, for I know the porter at the entrance, and he promised to tell me if ever he saw him again. I must find that man," ended John Henry with energy, "for I am assured that the poor little fellow is still in trouble."

John Henry sat and frowned at the fire. George Cornwall and Muggie astonished, cast uneasy glances at George and Sheila, who were engaged on a vivid and mute pantomime which appeared to be both disturbing and pleasing in meaning.

"I beg your pardon," said John Henry, coming back with a start.

"I have been thinking aloud. I have had a lot of worry of late. There was a boy——"

Sheila, energetically kicking George on the shin, interrupted with determination. She had no wish for either her father or Muggie to say anything indiscreet on the subject of Mabel Canning, and John Henry might be about to give a description of Little David.

"There was," she said, "and George and I want to know about him. He came out of a first-class carriage, carrying your suitcase, and we thought, at first, he must be you."

John Henry became reserved.

"I followed your instructions about the train," he said with dignity, "but I prefer to travel third. It is useful to me because of the opportunity to study people. The boy was traveling third, and he gave up his seat to me." He was silent, for a moment, and then he turned to Sheila and spoke in an entirely altered voice. "Do you think I could travel down in comfort after having seen that poor, wasted face gazing out of a packed and stifling carriage?"

"I do not," said Sheila, "but most people would not have seen it at all. One thing I do think is that you want some one to look after you. George is of the same opinion. Hand me his coat, George."

George handed her the garment in question.

"May I?" asked Sheila with her hand over the pocket.

"Of course you may," said John Henry.

Sheila extracted the packet of notes—there were not many, and handed it to John Henry, who stowed it away hurriedly and in some confusion. George Cornwall, highly amused, chuckled aloud; and Muggie goggled with curiosity.

"We are used to extraordinary happenings in the Red House," she said, "but this beats everything. How on earth did you know Mr. Millman's money was there?"

"Never mind," said Sheila. "Go on and tell us about the boy, Mr. Millman."

"I really know nothing about him, but I can guess," said John Henry. "He has been ill—a long and wasting illness. The doctors have done what they could, but they can do no more. They have sent him home to die. I gathered that from his face looking out of the train, and when I reached Tipping Horley and saw the old porter greeting him, then I understood everything. I have spoken to the old man before. They have not enough money to give the boy a chance of life. His illness has already driven the old man back to work. It is hard to die and be an added expense to those whom you love."

"Perhaps he will not die at all," said Sheila. "You will never be a millionaire, Mr. Millman."

"I hope not," said John Henry in all seriousness. "A lot of money must be a terrible responsibility."

"Somebody is going to make money out of this book of yours," said George Cornwall, "and if you can see it as a play, you also stand to make a little. If these young people go away and leave us alone we might discuss the matter in peace. I asked you down here as a purely business proposition promoted by Canning, but you are welcome to stay as long as you please with no thought of business at all."

In this manner John Henry found himself taken to the bosom of the family at the Red House, and he was exceedingly pleased. He listened to what George Cornwall had to say on the subject of his book, and he glowed with pleasure over his kindly and well-meant criticisms and generous praise. He watched Sheila and smiled—a fact which that young woman noted in his favour, and he studied young George with interest. Altogether John Henry was exceedingly happy; but he did not forget his anxiety on the subject of Little David, and he did not forget to think of visiting the odd man at the Black Bull at Tipping Horley, and he determined to make a number of excursions to the station to inquire after the state of the sick boy.

The first of these excursions was promoted by Sheila, aided by

George, and approved by the other two members of the Cornwall family with reserve. This happened at breakfast on the day following his arrival, and the elder members of the household knew that Sheila must have some definite object in view, and so they were somewhat distracted.

They were more distracted still when—John Henry safely out of the house—Sheila commenced to outline a part of the tale of Little David, and passed on to the statement that the young gentleman was shortly to put in an appearance at the Red House.

Muggie said that she had never heard of such a thing, and George Cornwall backed her opinion. He went a step further than this and stated that he would not be a party to so dangerous a proceeding. He also said something about putting his foot down once and for all. Whereupon Sheila and George commenced to argue and put forward reasons both wise and foolish with all the enthusiasm of youth. They went on arguing till Muggie became uncertain whether she stood on her head or her heels—she was seated in a comfortable chair, by the way, and George Cornwall dropped his most cherished meerschaum pipe—it would have been broken if Sheila had not caught it in time. This last incident caused George Cornwall to wonder what he would do without Sheila; and that, I believe, was more instrumental in causing him to look favourably on the scheme than anything else.

In the middle of the discussion—they were grouped round the fire in the sitting-room—the door opened and John Henry Millman walked in. He appeared both angry and excited, yet he also appeared vastly pleased. He carried a suit-case in one hand, a parcel done up in brown paper in the other; and, securely attached by both hands to the left sleeve of his coat, was a small, slender youth, dressed in a blue, double-breasted rain-proof coat and a grey felt hat. The coat was long and came below the knees, and the hat was pulled well down over the head. He was very white and the line of his mouth was very straight. His eyes were wide open, and there was a stunned, dazed expression on his face. He

abandoned his hold on John Henry's coat and stood by himself in the middle of the floor in a composed, but curiously constrained, attitude. It took the Cornwall family quite a few moments to trace a resemblance in him to Mabel Canning. John Henry, acutely conscious of the necessity for an explanation of this invasion, opened his mouth; but the youth made a statement before he had time to speak.

"Father has turned me out," he said quietly, and then he swayed and fell in a heap on the floor.

As George Cornwall said, long afterwards, it ended the discussion before Muggie and he went mad, and that was one good thing anyway.

Astonishment and consternation had held the Cornwall family motionless, but when the youth swayed Sheila sprang to her feet. She was not in time to catch him, but she was in time to thrust John Henry out of the way. She did this with vigour, and then she—there is no other description possible—seemed to spread herself over the prostrate figure.

"George!" she commanded in a voice of agony. "Take him away. Take them both away—at once!"

George was a young man of action, also it was his pleasure to obey Sheila in all things. John Henry and George Cornwall found themselves on the other side of the closed door before they knew what had happened; and young George continued to hold them there, awaiting instructions from within. The three male things regarded one another; John Henry astounded, George Cornwall perturbed, and young George astonished but calm and quite collected.

"Leave him to Sheila. She knows what to do," said the latter gentleman with confidence.

From within came the sound of a painful gasp, the low murmur of two sympathetic female voices, and then the unmistakable sound of some one weeping bitterly. John Henry became restive.

"Let go," he said. "I must go in. I cannot leave the poor

little fellow alone. A boy hates crying at any time and before strangers makes it worse."

George relinquished his hold of the elder George and confined his attention to John Henry.

"He is not with strangers," he said. "You must stay here."

John Henry was astounded.

"You have seen Little David before!" he exclaimed.

"Never," said both the Georges with decision.

"Well—!" commenced John Henry.

"His father has apparently turned him out. You know him. That is enough for us," interrupted the elder George, unexpectedly coming to the rescue. "He requires to be mothered, and Muggie will be glad to do that. Come into the garden both of you. It is not good for a man to listen to a—a boy crying like that. It tends to soften the brain, and make you consent to foolish things. Come away at once!"

The elder George departed through the door in haste, and betook himself to the furthest point of the garden from the house. He stood by a gap in the hedge, mopping his brow, and he looked as if it would not take much to induce him to nip through the gap, gain the adjacent road, and flee altogether. The younger George, after a moment of hesitation, followed the elder one; and as he still retained a policeman-like grip on John Henry, that gentleman went also. They found the elder George in an agitated state of gloom.

"It is my doing," said John Henry with contrition, "for I brought him here. I did not think. I just acted. I am a fool."

"I don't want to be a fool," said the elder George with vigour. "That is why I came out. They will not allow me to remain, but never mind. Where did you find him, Mr. Millman?"

"It was just outside Tipping Horley," said John Henry. "He came round a corner, walking very fast, looking as if some one had struck him across the face. He saw me, stopped in the middle of the road, and his parcels dropped from his hands. He paid no

attention to them and I thought he was going to faint. I ran up, for I was very pleased to see him again, but he shrank back at once. He is a strange boy," said John Henry reflectively, "and dislikes being touched. I learnt that before. It is very odd."

"Nothing odd about it at all," said the elder George, and then he wilted under an indignant stare from the younger one. "Some people are like that," he added hastily. "My own brother . . . !"

"I asked where he was going and what was the matter," continued John Henry, "and he seemed too dazed to know or reply. Then he said his father had turned him out, and when I heard that and saw his lips quivering, I just spoke and acted without thinking."

"What did you do?" asked the younger George in an interested voice.

"I lifted his packages," said John Henry with reserve, "and advised him to come with me. He did too," continued John Henry with no reserve at all, "just as he did when I took him away from the Dainty Brute. He grasped the sleeve of my coat with both hands and hung on hard, only I did not feel that he was holding my coat at all, and so I came straight here without thinking. You know," said John Henry simply, "when something small and helpless takes a hold on your heart, you do not think. You just act."

The garden of the Red House was quite a safe place for John Henry to make this remark in, although, unfortunately, every place would not be like it.

"I believe," said the elder George in a hollow voice, "that I would have been wiser to remain in the house. I can see——"

"What can you see?" interrupted the younger George in a voice of warning.

"Oh! Somebody in the road, I think," said George Cornwall in a hopeless fashion.

"Extraordinary!" said young George with such an air of its

being an exceptional thing, but they all peered excitedly through the gap in the hedge.

"Perhaps it is somebody after Little David," said John Henry, and he immediately became war-like. "I shall go and find out."

Young George, certain that no one was about, restrained him. George Cornwall, rendered light-headed by the trend of events, assisted. They became mixed, and presented the appearance of three men in combat rather than three peaceable male things standing in a private garden. An extraordinary spectacle which was not wasted, for there *was* some one in the road, and that some one was vividly interested.

"Please, sir!" said a voice from the rear, and they all turned round to confront the little maid of all work, and she appeared to be confused and distracted.

"Well!" demanded George Cornwall. "What is it now?"

"You are all to come in at once, at least you are not to come in at all," she said confusedly. "I mean you must never come in no more."

"What did Miss Sheila say?" asked young George with discernment.

"She said you were to come in at once, but the missus——"

"Come on!" said young George joyously. He seized George Cornwall by the arm, and retaining his grip on John Henry, commenced to rush them towards the house.

In the sitting-room Muggie sat on the edge of her chair in an upright and impressive attitude as if she had been delivering a lecture on some subject of vital importance. Sheila stood before the fire with her hands clasped behind her back, her face flushed, and her expression one of righteous indignation. Little David crouched in a large, low chair, half hidden by the arms; and what could be seen of him appeared both startled and apprehensive. The dazed, stunned look had gone from his eyes, but they remained very sad and wistful. He was obviously nervous, ill at ease, and

unwilling to face the three men. Curiously enough it was George Cornwall he seemed to dread the most.

The three men sat down; John Henry near Little David, young George in a position of advantage to admire Sheila, and George Cornwall by the side of Muggie. Sheila remained standing.

"David Johnson," she commenced, enunciating the name with great distinctness, and then she turned fiercely on young George. "What did you say?" she demanded.

"I merely remarked—the son of John," said George humbly.

"Don't be a fool," said Sheila.

"I'm sorry," said George contritely. "I could not help it."

"David Johnson," repeated Sheila, "has told us his story, so I thought you had better come in and hear it too. He has been treated shamefully—shamefully! His father is a brute. Go on, Little David!"

Little David appeared to find it difficult to go on.

"I—I had to go somewhere," he said in an uncertain voice, and he seemed to address George Cornwall in particular. It was almost as if he were trying to placate him for being there.

George Cornwall looked at the fire, frowned, and seemed to be making a great effort to appear stern and unyielding.

"You had to go somewhere because they were so unkind to you at home that you could not stay there," said John Henry in a low voice. "You went once before, got into trouble, got out of it again, and now—through some misconception—your father has turned you out. You came here because you met me, and you are sorry to bother these kind folk. You want to go to some place where your father, or any of the other people who have persecuted you, can not come to take you away. You would never have got into trouble at all if you had not been like a flower in a dark spot reaching out for the light of the sun. You have been left alone—disregarded perhaps, and your heart hurts. It is all quite plain. There is no necessity for you to speak at all."

Little David turned toward John Henry and spread out his hands in an appealing, helpless fashion.

"That is the simple truth," he said, and his lips twitched. "I have done no wrong. I have tried hard to please my father. It has been hopeless. He does not want me. He accused me of unspeakable things, said that I was no child of his, and told me to go. He looked as if he would have liked to blast me where I stood. I went. What else could I do?"

John Henry, Sheila, Muggie, and young George, all opened their mouths, and appeared to be about to make statements in answer to this; but the words were never uttered. A sudden babel of sound came from outside. Two voices raised in altercation arose shrilly insistent. There were all the indications of a struggle, and no small struggle at that. The front door banged shut three times, and was as often forced open. The furniture in the hall appeared to be suffering. The Cornwall family recognised the one voice as the property of the little maid of all work. They were dumbfounded. John Henry seemed to recognise the other voice. He was amazed. Astonishment held the listeners in the sitting-room motionless, and the struggle reached the door of the room.

"In that room," said one of the voices, and John Henry doubted his own hearing. "Then I am going in. Nothing will stop me!"

This, apparently, was true, for the door burst open and a curious, lop-sided figure rushed in, closely followed by the little maid of all work. John Henry arose with a gasp. It was Veronica and she was hatless, her hair half down, her clothes anyhow; but there was a flush of victory on her sallow cheeks. The little maid of all work was likewise disarranged and she seemed to be on the point of tears.

"She is mad. She would come in. I could not stop her!" she gasped.

"Veronica! Whatever is the meaning of this intrusion?" asked John Henry with indignation.

The flush of victory faded from Veronica's cheeks. She looked

round the room in a stupid, vacant fashion; and she seemed to shrink and grow additionally misshapen in her clothes. A hopeless, horrified expression came over her face, and she glanced at John Henry's indignant figure with the stricken eyes of a dumb creature in excessive pain. She did not look at his face. She seemed to be afraid to do that, or perhaps it was because he had never looked angrily at her before.

"I made a mistake, Mr. John," she said in a whisper. "I made a mistake. I come to the wrong door. I—I made a great mistake, but I'll go at once. I'll go this minute."

Her voice caught and broke over the words. Her sallow, unlovely features moved in a queer, spasmodic fashion; and her odd, lop-sided body quivered and shook. She turned towards the door, an extraordinary sight with the thin strands of hair hanging from her head; and she looked like a figure of fun from hell's Christmas pantomime. They all, John Henry included, watched her in a speechless amazement; and she paused at the door but she did not face them.

"I didn't go to displease you, Mr. John," she whispered, and her back quivered.

John Henry moved forward, but he was too late. Little David had sprung to his feet and was there before him. He slipped an arm round Veronica and prevented her from leaving the room. He continued to hold her and his voice was exceedingly gentle.

"You must not go away," he said. "You must stay here and tell us what has gone wrong. I know you meant no harm. What made you act so strangely?"

"I thought he had got into trouble, that they were keeping him here against his will," said Veronica humbly. "I saw them holding him in the garden, and pulling him into the house, and I could not stay outside. I thought he might escape while they were knocking me about, and—I've only made a mess of everything!"

As George Cornwall remarked that night there was some one in the road after all.

"A mess of everything," whispered Veronica, and she burst into a torrent of tears.

Little David, acting on a spontaneous impulse that was exceedingly pretty to watch, gave Veronica a hearty hug and a kiss on the lips at one and the same time—then he hastily retreated a step.

Veronica stopped weeping at once. She appeared to be bewildered, and she also appeared to forget her distress for a full moment. She stared at Little David, and Little David's eyes fell, and his cheeks grew red. It was only natural that Veronica should be bewildered, for very few, if any, kisses had come in her direction. It was natural, too, that Little David should be confused. A kiss is an effeminate salutation. Still it was odd that Veronica should forget her distress if only for a moment, and that she had done so was so obvious, for when John Henry spoke, she lost her air of astonishment, her interest in Little David, and immediately became contrite.

"Whatever made you think I was in trouble?" asked John Henry, and he touched her gently on the shoulder. "Veronica 'does' for me," he explained to the others. "I should be lost without her. She is a regular jewel of industry."

"She nearly did for me," said the little maid of all work unexpectedly.

"You would do the same yourself if you had an outside like me—for any one that had looked after you," said Veronica and—oddly enough—she glanced at Little David after she had said this.

John Henry immediately became reserved and dignified; and Sheila, perceiving this, took command of the situation.

"Veronica must go and tidy herself," she said. "Then she can come back and tell us everything."

Veronica went, and John Henry was moved to remark in a pained voice during her absence:

"I'm afraid we are both proving a great trouble to you all."

This remark seemed to please Little David, Sheila, and young

George; but Muggie and George Cornwall received it with an added gloom.

Veronica, returning, found them all staring at the fire in silence; and she seated herself nervously on the extreme edge of a chair. She refused to utter a word at first, and then speech came with a rush. She explained her grounds for the belief that John Henry must be in trouble—John Henry was astounded. She outlined his reckless expenditure of the past weeks on eggs, and food, and otherwise—the face of Muggie became greatly softened. She stated her conviction that he was incapable of looking after himself, or earning money like other men, and she hinted at her distrust of his writing propensities—George Cornwall was charmed and amused beyond words. She explained his absence for a night and his subsequent state of unrest, touching lightly on the letters that had received so much attention—Little David stirred uneasily in his chair and disappeared from sight behind his hands. She described his arrival in a cab in a damaged state, her own determination to act, his method of accepting the invitation to the Red House, his unsettled state previous to his departure, and her own resolution to follow and find out if he were, in truth, in the clutches of wicked people—they were all affected. All this she outlined with great clarity, in odd language, and with the simple, touching sincerity of absolute truth and honesty. Her tale came like a clean, fresh wind and swept away all the mists, misunderstandings, doubts, and fears brought to life by the presence of Little David.

“I waited for a day,” said Veronica in conclusion, “and then I could wait no longer. I asked the missus for a day off, and perhaps a night too. She was astonished, but she could not refuse. I have not had a day off for years. I came down here and saw the house. Then I saw the stout gentleman”—George Cornwall started—“rush out suddenlike from the front door. Mr. John followed, held securely by a young man, and they stood by the gap in the hedge. I may have been mistaken but they seemed

to be fighting. Mr. John tried to get away through the gap in the hedge, and then he was rushed back to the house. That was enough for me. I determined to get in, and when the maid stopped me I just went on. I am very sorry to have disturbed you all, but I could not do otherwise with the thoughts that have been in my head for weeks."

John Henry was exceedingly touched by the simple words of Veronica.

"You are a dear, Veronica," he said, "and I do not know quite what to say. I should have told you, long ago, that my book has been accepted and published. That is where the money came from."

Veronica stiffened and seemed stunned by astonishment.

"Do people give you money for that?" she asked in a wondering voice.

"They do—occasionally," George Cornwall assured her.

"Well I never did!" said Veronica. She seemed lost for a moment and then she recovered. "He will make heaps of money," she said, "for he never does anything else. I've grown to hate the sight of paper and pens, watching him grow tired, and white, and weary, writing pages and pages; and then typing it all out again."

"If he works so hard," said Sheila suddenly, "he wants some one to type and do the odd things for him. It would cut the work in two. George does that for father and I help them both. He could do more work with less trouble, and make more money into the bargain."

John Henry became reserved.

"Veronica exaggerates," he said with dignity. "I have scarcely written a word for weeks."

"I do not," said Veronica. "You have been worried about something ever since you were away for a night, and that has kept you from writing. Once you get over that, you will start off again like a house on fire. I'm certain of it."

There was an interval of silence which John Henry felt impelled to break.

"I have had a lot of worry of late—over my book," he said austere. "Then I saw the Dainty Brute and became worried about you," he added without any trace of austerity, turning to Little David.

"The Dainty Brute!" said Little David in alarm. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing," said John Henry. "That was what worried me. I wanted to learn if you were out of trouble."

Little David appeared vastly relieved and Sheila made a statement.

"Mr. Millman was taking Little David out of trouble on the night when he was away from home," she said, apparently addressing her remark to the fire.

Veronica jumped and gasped.

"Oh!" she said profoundly. "That explains everything." She looked searchingly, first at Little David, and then at John Henry. "The poor innocent!" she added in a voice of pity.

Now whether this last remark referred to John Henry, or to Little David, it is impossible to tell, for no one attempted to find out. John Henry merely preserved an air of calm dignity, and Little David—for some unknown reason—grew violently red in the face.

"Little David," continued Sheila, still addressing the fire, "is again in trouble. His father has turned him out—accused him of unspeakable things. Mr. Millman happened—by pure chance—to meet him walking along the road, and brought him here. We were just discussing what he is going to do—he cannot return home—when Veronica arrived."

A look of fright came on the faces of the two elder members of the Cornwall family, but they remained silent. Little David, possibly because the conversation was about him, had disappeared into the shadow of his chair. John Henry became absorbed in

some profound cogitation or calculation. Veronica sat very tense on the edge of her chair and the contrite expression vanished from her face. She seemed fierce, prepared to fight as you might say, but she also remained silent.

"Little David," continued Sheila in the same meditative voice, "has a foster-mother, and it was to her that Mr. Millman took him on the previous occasion. Little David is very fond of her, but he is afraid to go there, for his father would know where he was. He does not know what to do, or where to go, or to whom to turn for help. He only wants to be allowed to live. So far he has not had a chance. That is all."

There was a period of silence, during which Veronica transferred her eyes to Little David's chair with a stare of fierce antagonism. John Henry remained absorbed and lost. The entire Cornwall family waited with an air of expectation, and in the case of the elder members the expectation appeared to be mixed with apprehension. Little David stirred in the shadow of his chair and then he rose to his feet.

"I think it would be better if I went away at once," he said quietly, and his face had grown suddenly white. "I wish to bring trouble to no one." He made the same curious, helpless gesture with his hands. "I do not seem to be wanted—anywhere."

Each individual member of the Cornwall family negated this idea. They made quite a chorus of it, and Sheila plumped Little David back into his chair with unnecessary violence. Veronica removed her eyes from him, and the antagonism had faded from her face, replaced by an expression far from antagonistic. John Henry, recalled by the noise from the distant vista he had been considering, uttered a remark in a meditative voice.

"I think it could be managed," he said.

Veronica said shortly: "Small back breaking up badly."

This statement startled and puzzled the Cornwall family, but it seemed to afford John Henry the greatest enjoyment.

"Are you quite certain?" he asked eagerly.

"Quite!" said Veronica. "It will be all over by now."

"Then that settles it," said John Henry.

"Just what I've been thinking all along," said Veronica, "only I was not sure at first that it would be a good thing. Now I think it will."

The Cornwall family, mystified, demanded an explanation of those remarks. Muggie in particular—she suffered from her back, poor soul—was exceedingly curious.

"The small back has a communicating door with the large back, and I am the large back," said John Henry. "It is a bad let in consequence, and the present man has been dissatisfied for weeks. I have been figuring out how he could be persuaded to go, but as Veronica says he has already determined to clear out, there is no need to worry."

"Told Mrs. Baldwin that she was a dissipated cat," murmured Veronica in a tone of excessive appreciation.

"My landlady," said John Henry in explanation, "not a bad soul, but she has her faults like other people."

"She has," murmured Veronica and breathed hard.

The Cornwall family, looking at one another in some surprise, waited for further enlightenment, but none was forthcoming.

"Well—!" commenced George Cornwall in a voice of inquiry, but Sheila, jumping to her feet, cut him short.

"You mean that Little David can have the small back," she exclaimed in great excitement.

"Why, of course!" said John Henry in an astonished voice. "Wherever did you think the boy was going, if he were not coming to me?"

As George Cornwall said that night—there was a solemn conclave in the sitting-room after John Henry was safe in bed at which Veronica assisted—it was about the only place where Little David could go—as Little David.

Muggie had a good deal to say at this conclave, and her remarks were topped, finished off as you might say, by a gasping reference

to the communicating door. Veronica, who had said a great deal about John Henry, uttered a few pregnant words on this very subject as she left the room. She said:

“The door has no handle and it is locked. The key will be lost, ten minutes after I get back, and it will not be found. There are a lot of old newspapers and an odd mattress lying in the cellar. There is no need to worry about that door so long as I am in the house—and I never leave it.”

John Henry, utterly unconscious of the storm beneath, slept peacefully; and it did not occur to him to wonder where Little David was put up for the night in that small house. He was a very easy person to deal with in small matters was John Henry Millman, and an exceedingly trusting person so long as his suspicions were not aroused. When they were, well, he was not easy to deal with because, when he thought hard, he saw what other people see, and a great deal more to boot.

CHAPTER XII

THE DISTRESS OF THREE DECENT AND ORDINARY MEN

MABEL CANNING's story was the essence of simplicity. It might aptly be called "The Tragedy of Two Straight Mouths"—a tale about nothing, and it was full of pathos and unconscious humour as all exceedingly human tales are. There were no heroics, no stirring incidents in it, it was just a simple piece of life muddled by wise humanity—you can see the same thing anywhere, any time you care to look for it. Philip Canning had returned from London filled with the thought that John Henry Millman must be bound to his firm in bonds of interest and respect. Mabel Canning had returned from the Red House filled with a mixture of emotions that I shall not attempt to outline or explain. They were both preoccupied. In the late afternoon Mabel had a telephone message from young George speaking from the Black Bull at Tipping Horley. This increased her preoccupation. The father and daughter met at dinner and consumed that meal in silence. Near its termination Philip Canning had a sudden memory. Mabel had wished to ask or tell him something. He said abruptly:

"You were going to ask, or tell me something. You can do so now—if it is of any importance."

The tone of his voice implied that it could not be of importance—coming from Mabel.

It was, apparently, of no importance.

Mabel went to bed, at least she did not go to bed, but she spent the greater part of the night with her door locked, trying on the clothes of Little David. Philip Canning, having sat up late,

stepped out into the garden for a breath of air before going to bed. He was astonished to see the light still burning in Mabel's room. There was the roof of a verandah directly under the window and the window was half open. It crossed Philip Canning's mind that the house could very easily be burgled from that point. The thought drove him across the lawn till he stood before the window considering how one could reach it with very little trouble. As he was doing this a shadow came on the blind—the shadow of Mabel in the clothes of Little David. It appeared, unmistakably, to be the shadow of one in male attire. Philip Canning was petrified with astonishment. It was there for a bare second, however, and so he came to the conclusion that, with his mind running on burglars, his eyes were playing tricks. He waited for a little but the shadow did not return. He went back into the house. He was entirely unsuspicious, somewhat curious, and he wondered what the girl could be doing. His curiosity sent him softly to her door on the way to his room.

He stood in the passage listening to the movements within, and he distinctly heard the sound of a laugh—a low, soft, exceedingly tender laugh. He was so astonished that he involuntarily attempted to open the door—it was locked. Immediately there came a startled gasp—a gasp of mingled fright, and fear, and apprehension. The window crashed shut, and then there was absolute silence.

“What on earth are you doing, child?” asked Philip Canning.

The sound of her father's voice completed Mabel's panic. She crouched against the window—speechless. Her voice had fled.

Philip Canning repeated his question with an added request to open the door. Mabel found her voice.

“I—I can't open the door. I'm going to bed. I have been doing nothing, nothing at all,” she gasped. “I was about to shut the window. You frightened me and it slipped from my fingers!”

Philip Canning was reassured. He went away with a word of advice about girls being asleep at an early hour; but he thought

of the shadow on the blind after he had got into bed. It was all very curious. He thought also of the laugh which he had heard while standing in the passage and this reminded him that Mabel was only a child. A grown person, Philip Canning knew, does not laugh aloud in that fashion when no one is about. It would be absurd! There could be no reason for it! Philip Canning had a splendid supply of reason—the business had prospered in his hands. His mind reverted to the legal point which had kept him up so late . . . he slept.

Mabel did not sleep much that night. The thought of her father at the door while she was within dressed as Little David disturbed her by the narrowness of the escape from detection. She was filled with excitement at the thought of appearing as Little David at the Red House, of again seeing John Henry Millman; and she was oppressed—poor little soul—with a sense of guilt at the idea of deceiving her father. She even went the length of meditating a fresh attempt to win his interest, and an open confession to him of her strange escapades. She wondered if he would say anything at breakfast, and she meditated on what she could answer. All this tended to give her an appearance of guilt and shame.

Philip Canning said nothing in the morning, as it happened, because there was a long letter from George Cornwall on the subject of John Henry Millman. He had decided to speak to Mabel, for the shadow on the blind still worried him, but he postponed the matter till after lunch. He was, in this, partly actuated by kindness because he could see that the girl was unhappy and uneasy.

It was consideration on his part, but it was also exceedingly unfortunate. For one thing because, if he had mentioned the shadow, Mabel would have told him the entire story. For another because a third member of the household had been awake late on the previous night.

He was astonished, on going to his study, to find the house-

keeper there waiting for him. She was a stern, sexless woman greatly disliked by Mabel, and she had been in Philip Canning's service for years. She stood with her back to the wall, her left hand concealed behind her back, and her expression was fierce, and grim, and exceedingly indignant. Philip Canning, although he was annoyed at the intrusion, realized from her face that she must have something serious to talk about. She had.

It appeared that she had been unable to sleep on the previous night owing to a severe headache. She had turned and tossed for hours, and then she had thought that she heard some one moving about outside. She put this down to imagination, but the sound of a window closing with a crash she could not put down to imagination. She arose, assumed a dressing-gown and slippers, and going down stairs went over the rooms to see that no one was about. There was no one. In the conservatory off the drawing-room she happened to look up and was astounded to see a light in Mabel's window. As she was reflecting on the carelessness of young girls, assured that Mabel was sound asleep, a shadow crossed the blind. The thought occurred to her that the girl might be ill and she went up at once to find out; but, once outside the door, this idea was dispelled by the sound of the opening, shutting, and locking of drawers. She wondered what the girl could be doing, then the light went out, and she heard her creep into bed. She was about to go away when she was arrested by the sound of Mabel's voice. It was muffled and indistinct, and she had not caught all the words, but the sense of the remark was plain. Some one of the name of David had left something lying on the dressing-table.

She attached no importance to this at the time, but continuing to be wakeful, remembering the crash of the window and the imagined sounds outside, she had grown exceedingly thoughtful. The memory of an occasion when she had seen Mabel emerge from a mean street in the town recurred to her mind. The girl—on being subsequently asked what she was doing there—had

flushed, appeared startled, and offered a strange and obviously false excuse. She had thought nothing of it then, now she did. She determined to search the girl's bedroom while she was in her bath. She had done so, and this was what she had found concealed under a pile of clothes in the wardrobe.

The housekeeper, withdrawing her left hand from behind her back, thrust Little David's hat—a man's soft felt hat—under Philip Canning's nose. Mabel, having locked away the clothes of Little David that she intended to wear on the next day, packed the rest in a suit-case, had left the hat lying on the dressing-table. Remembering this after she had got into bed, she had not rectified the omission; and rising late the next morning, she had hastily hidden it in the wardrobe.

"I have often thought that Miss Mabel went very frequently to see her foster-mother," said the housekeeper with a dry, hard cough.

Under the circumstances, in view of what he himself had heard and witnessed on the previous night, Philip Canning can scarcely be blamed for what he said and did. It is true that most of the blame lay at his door, but the origin of the trouble went far further back than the present disturbance—back to the time when he was left with a motherless child on his hands, and onwards through long years of a thoughtless disregard. He was a decent man. He had a horror of lies and deceit—always placing business matters out of consideration—and his suspicions were thoroughly aroused. He refrained from telling the housekeeper that he himself had been awake late on the previous night, and he asked her to remain in the room. He hoped that Mabel would be able to explain the matter in a satisfactory fashion, and he had no wish to blacken the case by added proof. His indignation was awakened to a full sense of the possible outrage to his impeccable respectability.

He sent for Mabel and the summons by itself was sufficient to startle her. It was so unusual. She came. The sight of her

father's stern face and the forbidding countenance of the housekeeper increased her alarm. She stood before the desk in a forlorn and frightened attitude, and the colour rose and fell rapidly in her cheeks.

Philip Canning, perceiving this, frowned. He proceeded to ask her a number of questions, and her answers were not spontaneous because she failed to understand the reason for the questioning. The frown on Philip Canning's face grew more apparent. Then he asked one question which startled her exceedingly. It was a full moment before she replied, and she avoided his eyes when she spoke and stared at the floor.

Had she any friends—male friends—of whom he knew nothing?

It appeared that she had not, but the denial was uttered in an uncertain and hesitating voice. She was not a convincing liar. She lacked experience.

The housekeeper thought fit to cough at this moment.

Philip Canning's face darkened and the line of his mouth grew very apparent. He went on with his questioning but the tone of his voice had altered completely. It was cold, and harsh, and peremptory.

He asked what she had been doing in her room on the previous night, and to this she answered, in all sincerity, that she had been arranging her clothes—but she was a trifle confused. The next question took her completely by surprise. Had she been alone? She had been. She was quite certain of this? She was quite certain. Philip Canning remained silent for a long time, studying her face, and she grew exceedingly nervous. She did strange things with her hands.

Quite suddenly he produced Little David's hat from under the desk and asked for an explanation of its presence in her wardrobe. He did not ask if it belonged to her. The sight of the hat stunned Mabel, and the presence of the housekeeper increased the difficulty of an explanation. She stood silent, went hot and then cold, gasped, and finally asked to speak to him—alone. She had

determined to take her courage in both hands, make a last appeal, and tell him—everything.

Philip Canning, watching her, felt suddenly sickened. His mouth closed like a trap on a blunt refusal, and he waited for her to speak. It may be remarked in passing that about this time the line of Mabel's own mouth commenced to grow apparent. She remained silent, and then he commenced to speak himself in a calm, icy voice that made Mabel shudder. The words were not easy for his pride to utter, and he continued to hope that an explanation would be forthcoming to contradict and confute them. He said nothing about what he had seen and heard, that he kept to himself. This was unfortunate for it made the accusation appear doubly unkind and unjust. He did not think of this. It was the humiliation to his own pride that hurt him—then.

He commenced by mentioning the incident of the box of cigarettes—the cigarettes she had denied having smoked. He said that her attitude, her manner of answering his questions, had filled him with distrust and suspicion. He mentioned that the housekeeper had been in his service for years—a servant of proved worth and integrity—and he outlined what she had told him, speaking with added assurance in face of his own experience of the previous night. Then he asked for an explanation that would reasonably cover these facts. If he had sent the housekeeper away and done this in a kindly voice, Mabel might have explained at once and in detail. As it was she remained dumb, staring at him in a stricken and horrified fashion, and the line of her mouth remained straight.

The housekeeper thought fit to cough for the second time.

That did it. Philip Canning's wrath rose. He spoke and his voice was harsh and bitter. He accused Mabel of horrible things, of having a man in her room on the previous night, of living a life of lies and deceit; and in the middle of this a thought occurred to him that struck him dumb. He sat and stared at her with a dreadful inquiry, and she shook under his gaze. At that he rose

and waved the housekeeper out of the room. He seized the shrinking girl by the shoulders, shook her with the violence of his own horror and despair, and put the thought that tormented him into words.

"You were going to tell me something, what was it?"

She *had* been going to tell him something. She had been trying to tell him something all her life—that she wanted to please, consider, and love him; but the accusation in his voice made this more than difficult now. She made the attempt—in spite of her mouth. She went dead white, but she met his eyes with a wide-open, pitiful stare.

"Father!" she said humbly. "I am your daughter. Are you blind or mad?"

Philip Canning believed that his worst fears had received confirmation. He thrust her away from him with violence. He lifted the hat from off the desk and flung it in her face.

"Go away!" he said bitterly. "You are no daughter of mine to bring shame on my name. You baggage!"

Mabel went. She went straight to her room, holding Little David's hat in her hand. She was dazed, stunned, almost unconscious of what she was doing; yet she acted rapidly and with precision. She unlocked a drawer and changed into the clothes of Little David. She adjusted the contraption, made of her own hair when it had been cut short, procured for the fancy dress at school, and used since then on many occasions. She put away her discarded clothes, and she did all this mechanically as if to the bidding of an unseen party. She took an old frock and a battered hat from the wardrobe, tied them up in a parcel, seized the suitcase packed on the previous night, and walked down the stairs, across the drawing-room, through the open conservatory door, out at the side gate in the wall. No one saw her go.

She went to the town by the short cut through the fields. She took a ticket for London, but she arrived at Tipping Horley. The ticket remained in her purse. The ancient porter, recognising Little

David in great distress, allowed her to pass through the station without question. She walked straight from the train, through the village, along the country roads, encountered John Henry Millman and went on with him into the sitting-room of the Red House; and there, as has already been stated, she fainted. All these things she did mechanically, and almost without any volition on her own part. She might, as a matter of fact, have been walking in her sleep.

You will readily understand that Little David's version of Mabel Canning's story—told at the conclave while John Henry slept in the room above—was sufficiently bald and touching to stir the hearts of such foolish people as the Cornwall family and Veronica; while it also aroused a certain atmosphere of dislike for Philip Canning, and a feeling that it would be well for Little David to avoid seeing him for a time.

He—good and decent man—was sickened and shaken to the core. The prospect of facing his household, of meeting his respectable friends, of entering the offices of Canning and Canning, of encountering the respectful glances of Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds; and of seeing in all these eyes, on all these faces, a knowledge of his daughter's shame, was more than he could think of with calmness. Philip Canning was half demented. He sat and stared at the fire. He stood and stared at the pictures on the wall. He sat and held his head in his hands—all with the same result. He could not think. The name of Canning was disgraced for ever. Canning and Canning of impeccable business fame!

It was very sad! Oh, exceptionally sad! It really was—when you consider that this was all he thought of for more than two hours!

At the end of that time there was a knock at the door and the housekeeper entered. She stood just inside the room, and she stood sideways so that it was impossible for her to see him.

"I came in to say, sir, that I slept very soundly last night; and I have no recollection of being in your study this morning. I

have been a great number of years in your service, and I know what is due to one who has always treated me with justice. I had to speak—for your own good, but I do not talk of what does not concern me. I am your servant and shall do just what you please.”

“I shall talk to you presently,” said Philip Canning, and he writhed in his chair.

The housekeeper departed. Her words had humiliated Philip Canning on account of the fact that she was in a position to utter them—to *him*; but they also brought a certain consolation. The matter was not so black as it had at first appeared. No one knew anything about it. There was no reason why any one should know anything about it. Such matters could be arranged. The housekeeper would be a continual reproach to face, but her loyalty was absolute. A ray of hope dawned on his mind. He was enabled—possibly by means of the light of the said ray—to think coherently, to realize the overwhelming wrong to his dignity, and the disgrace attached to one who bore his name. His anger stirred afresh and he experienced a strong desire to go and seek Mabel, to tell her what he thought, to make her feel a part of what he was suffering. He brooded over this and he was glad—for the first time—that his wife was dead. He thought of her, wondering what she would have done, and his mind became confused. He made an attempt to face the problem of what he should do, and he found that it was impossible. He did not know what to do. He did not even know what to think or feel.

The earthquake, which Philip Canning had been tempting Providence to supply for years, had arrived; and he was consequently somewhat shattered. If it had been a matter of pure business, if all the electric wires in his big house had fused with the added complication of fire, if Ralph Seymour in a moment of lunacy had said what he thought in place of hinting at what he imagined was in his employer's mind, if anything that could be dealt with within the ordered routine of his life had occurred, then he would have acted with accuracy and despatch; but over

this problem he stumbled and halted. It was very natural that he should do so, for the problem touched a part of him that he had lost sight of for a great number of years—his heart to wit. He did not think of this. He did not even dream that it was the case.

He succeeded, eventually, in considering the matter in the light of reason; and then he thought out a plan that seemed just—to him, and that also suited himself as well. The girl must leave home at once. He would compensate her foster-mother for the trouble, expense, and the necessity of keeping her mouth shut. The pair of them must go to some quiet place and stay there. His daughter would be away from home on account of her health. He experienced a sensation of relief, but he did not appear at lunch. He could not face Mabel, and he had no desire for food.

It never once entered his head that the girl might have taken his words in a literal sense and gone out of his house and his life at one and the same time. He was too fully obsessed with the necessity of keeping a knowledge of her actions hidden from the outside world, so that his life might go on in its accustomed, honoured, and well-oiled groove, to think of anything so wildly improbable as that. The thought, however, occurred to the house-keeper. She had always disliked Mabel, but she knew that—like her father—she had a fund of determination. She was unable to escape from memories of the girl as a child, too; and this, somehow, altered her fierce antagonism against her. She went to her room and found that she was not there. She searched the house with a like result, and she grew alarmed.

Philip Canning sent for her, and she wished that she had not made her statement about forgetting everything. She wanted to tell him of her fears, but the sight of his face, his conversation, and the obvious fact that such a thought had not occurred to him, made this difficult. She experienced a sudden sense of resentment. She would have been better pleased if he had been blazing with anger. The man had no right to be so self-possessed in his obvious state of humiliation and discomfort.

He spoke to her calmly, dispassionately. He thanked her for her words and explained that he would not forget them. He went on to state that matters were not so bad as she had thought—his face twitched at this and she suddenly realized just how bad he believed them to be. There had been misunderstandings. He made several ineffectual attempts to utter Mabel's name, and failed; and finally said that he was about to write to Mrs. Bluebell. The letter would be taken that afternoon by hand to the foster-mother. He did not say by whose hand, but the inference was plain. She would explain to any one who cared to ask that it was a matter of health—the doctor had advised a complete and protracted change of air and surroundings.

After she had gone he set himself to write this letter, but it proved a difficult task. He commenced one letter and ended by tearing it up in a fury. He commenced afresh and that one lay on the desk while his fingers broke the pen in pieces. He seized a fresh pen, set his teeth and commenced again, but the written words seemed to rise up and hit him in the face. He went through a period of acute physical nausea—the lunch gong had sounded disregarded a long time past, and his habits were too regular for him to have any but a healthy appetite. Finally he decided that he could not write the letter. He would speak to Mabel. The idea of facing her filled him with a mixture of feelings that he was unable fully to comprehend. He shrank from the ordeal, but he had determination. He rang the bell.

Miss Mabel was out. She had not, it seemed, put in an appearance at lunch. It was impossible to say where she had gone, or when she would return. The housemaid—a kindly soul very fond of Mabel—made a point of explaining that she frequently went out but always stated where she was going and when she would return—in case some one asked. No one ever had asked. It was unfortunate that on this occasion she had departed from her usual custom.

It was. It appeared to Philip Canning's mind as an act of

rank disobedience, a deliberate flouting of his authority. The girl belonged to him. She had no right to absent herself at a time when her presence might be required at any moment. He gave instructions that she was to be sent to him the moment she returned, and he refused to admit the fact that he was grateful for the temporary respite. He was, however, and then a disguised curse came his way that he looked on in the light of a blessing.

The electric plant—his beloved toy—went out of gear. He set himself to overhaul it completely. He was too intent and busy to think. He had a snack sent in to him at dinner-time. He worked . . . moderately happy.

It was all very sad.

A little before ten o'clock he entered his study, physically tired, but mentally refreshed by his labours; and the necessity of dealing with Mabel arose like a black cloud on the horizon. He paused in the act of ringing the bell. He had left instructions for the girl to come to him. She would appear now that his task was ended. He fingered the pile of letters from the evening post and was astonished to find one there addressed to Mable—slipped in with the others by mistake no doubt. He studied the envelope. The writing was sprawling and illiterate, and the post-mark was London. A frown gathered on his brow. He hesitated for a second, tore open the envelope, and read.

The letter was peculiar, undated, and unaddressed. It started and ended without preamble, and it was all mixed up—like the ingredients of a pudding in the making.

It said:

“Fammy wants to tell her dearest child that she is here for a few days on business leastwise she thinks it will be a few days now although she did not then. Fammy has been thinking a lot about the cigarettes and other things and she says that it will all come out in the washing and that nothing matters if the blankets keep clean meaning by that you and your blessed image of a father. Fammy has never spoken disrespectfully of him before but she

thinks that the cigarettes were too bad. She says that there must be no more pranks or goings about and she sends her love to her dearest Mabel for she knows that she wants all she can get."

There was a last sentence added, apparently, as an afterthought.

"Don't stop trying to please him, dearie, for Fammy says it will all come right."

Philip Canning read this letter once and gathered that it was from Mabel's foster-mother. He read it a second time and gathered a strong impression that the tone of it was disrespectful to himself. He read it for a third time and the last sentence sent him to the bell. He disregarded the rest. He wanted to know who the "him" was that Fammy advised Mabel to please.

The housekeeper came in answer to the summons, and she appeared disturbed and unhappy.

"Send Miss Mabel to me," he said shortly.

"Miss Mabel has not been in all day," said the housekeeper respectfully. "I shall send her to you *if* she returns."

"Not in yet!" said Philip Canning in rising wrath and amazement. "You will send her to me *if* she returns! What do you mean, woman?"

"I think Miss Mabel has gone for good, sir," said the housekeeper, apprehensively, but with the conviction of belief. "She is very determined when once she takes a notion into her head."

"Gone for good!" said Philip Canning in a startled voice. "Gone for—nonsense! What makes you suspect such an absurdity?"

"Because she has taken nothing—not even the dress she was wearing this morning—except for an old frock and hat given her by a friend at school. She must have walked out of the house without even a coat on her back. I know all her clothes, and they are all there."

Philip Canning's face went a curious grey colour, and the letter from Fammy crumpled into a ball in his hand.

"She will have gone to her foster-mother," said the housekeeper,

glancing at him with compassion. "There is no other place that she could go to. I knew that she would be safe there or I would have told you sooner."

Philip Canning rose unsteadily to his feet and waved the woman out of the room.

"Go away!" he said hoarsely. "Leave me alone for a time. I must think!"

Fammy, he knew, was in London; and Mabel had not returned. He had told her to go away, and she had taken his words literally, leaving all the belongings that came from him behind her. She might have gone—anywhere. The thought appalled him, but his uttered words were more appalling still.

"This must not be known!" he whispered.

He stood, stupefied by the suddenness of it all, and then a thought came to him.

"She bears my name. She belongs to me. I must try to find her!" he muttered, but his soul seethed with the bitterness of humiliated pride.

He went to the telephone and spoke to the police. He sent for the car and told the man to leave it at the front door. He wished to go out by himself. He spent the night out of doors, and returned in the grey dawn of morning after a fruitless search, and in his mind he raged at the cause of the disturbance. He crept into bed, tired and weary, oppressed with a sense of a disastrous day; but it was far from a disastrous day for him. It was a very fortunate day indeed, for it set his feet on a road—a long road it is true and exceedingly stony at the outset, one along which he had far to travel in pain and discomfort, but still one well worth travelling on. He had set foot on the road to his own heart. He had found out that he had lost something, something that had not previously existed within the limits of his life.

You will readily understand that all efforts to trace what had become of Mabel Canning proved fruitless. She had vanished. She had. This can the more readily be understood when you come

to think that Philip Canning contrived to keep the matter secret from his household, his friends, and his acquaintances. The thought that Mabel might have fled to the Red House occurred to him, but he did not ask if she were there. He sent a plain-clothes detective over to Tipping Horley, however, and his report dispelled that idea. The ancient porter at the station did not even mention the arrival of Little David. As for the small maid of all work at the Red House, to whom the man of guile made amatory advances, she thought that he had fallen a victim to her charms and her artless information was rendered useless by feminine delight. She did not suspect that she had been cleverly tapped; but she did catch a cold waiting for the plain-clothes man in the rain on the subsequent evening. Philip Canning's silence did more to make George Cornwall and Muggie think favourably of Little David's existence and absence than anything else. As for Fammy she was infuriated and would not have helped Philip Canning if the King had asked her on bended knee—these are her own words.

It was all very pitiful, rather humorous, and exceedingly human.

Philip Canning continued to attend to the affairs of Canning and Canning; and one day he went up to London. Coming up in the underground lift at Paddington station, he found himself jammed against a girl he seemed to know. That she recognised him was obvious, for she tried to get away; but the crowd made this impossible. He stared at her. Then his face darkened and he frowned. It was Emma, the young housemaid, dismissed for undue familiarity with Mabel. The thought crossed his mind that she might be the originator of the trouble, and he regarded her with furious distaste.

She saw this and laughed. Then she spoke in a mocking voice. It was most disconcerting in the lift, full of well-dressed, seemly people.

"Give my love to Miss Mabel when you get home," she said. "Don't forget, for it is little of that she will find in your house," and she disappeared through the opening gates.

Philip Canning was furious, but a sense of justice reminded him that the girl had been dismissed without a character for no act of evil. Women, he knew, remembered to bear resentment. Long afterwards he came to look on Emma's remark with gratitude, but at the time he did not. He was unable to get away from the incident. He felt assured that Emma knew of Mabel's flight; that, perhaps, she was aware of where the girl was now. Her words buzzed in his head. They sent him back to a re-reading of the letter from Fammy. He sat up late, in deep thought, and that night before he went to bed he had advanced quite a distance down the stony road on which his feet were set. He went on travelling, day by day, and the box of cigarettes emerged at intervals from the drawer where it lay hidden. He did not smoke the cigarettes. He just looked at the box and thought.

The result of his thoughts nearly ended the life of Ralph Seymour in what would have been a painful, and yet a fitting, fashion. As for Sinclair Dodds he dribbled at the mouth, if such a thing may be said of a grown man, and a somewhat dry one at that.

These two gentlemen were seated, one morning, not in the room of harrowing memories to John Henry Millman and many other simple souls, but in a smaller, brighter, and more cheerful apartment in which there was nothing impressive, little that was not both useful and comforting, and a total absence of office fittings. They sat, one on either side of a small table in the middle of the floor, and they both leant back to the full capacity of their chairs which were obviously designed for comfort. Ralph Seymour sat facing the door and Sinclair Dodds sat facing Ralph Seymour. Ralph Seymour was meditatively engaged in biting a pen in the middle, and Sinclair Dodds was energetically engaged in talking with considerable animation.

"The change," said Sinclair Dodds, waving his hand by way of emphasis, "grows more marked every time I see him. I tell you there must be something radically wrong. The last time he was here, I caught him looking at the girl in the office as if she were

a human being. I do not like it at all. There is no saying what he might do next. He might alter his invariable routine, come up one morning without warning, and walk in here! What would we do then?"

Philip Canning never came to the office, of a morning, unless on a matter of important business already discussed and arranged by letter or telephone. He came occasionally, in the afternoon if he happened to be in Town; but that was all.

"What indeed!" said Ralph Seymour, gazing meditatively over Sinclair Dodds' head, and at the door. He bit hard on his pen, and at that moment the door opened and the subject of the conversation walked in.

It was a narrow escape for Ralph Seymour, for the pen snapped in his mouth, and his gasp of astonishment and dismay sent the one half an inconvenient distance down his throat. He coughed it up, however, which was a good thing; only for a publisher to die, choked by a pen, seems a seemly and fitting end. Sinclair Dodds, swinging round to gain a sight of the intruder, simply—as has already been stated—dribbled at the mouth. The two unfortunate gentlemen made a valiant attempt to assume the accustomed dignity of their calling; but it was no good. In that room they were not wont to be publishers. They were merely men. It was a very necessary and useful place of relaxation, but its existence, as such, was unknown to Philip Canning.

"Good morning, gentlemen, please do not move," said Philip Canning.

The two gentlemen did not move. They would have been at a loss to know what to do if they had. It was the first time that they had appeared before their senior partner and owner as men, and they were consequently greatly discomfited. The extraordinary part—as Sinclair Dodds subsequently remarked—was that Philip Canning also appeared to be a man. This struck them both a second after he had entered the room, but they refused to credit the testimony of their eyes, ears, and senses. In this they cannot be blamed,

for they did not know that the fetish of Philip Canning's life—Canning and Canning of unimpeachable fame—was in danger of being displaced and shattered.

There was a straight-backed chair by the window and on this Philip Canning sat down with the air of one who was very weary and depressed, but who yet had succeeded in perceiving something that had for long eluded his sight. He regarded his two partners and his two partners regarded him. There was an awkward silence during which he seemed to be trying to say something and failing in the attempt. Then he asked Ralph Seymour a question, and it is not to be wondered that the poor man was startled.

"Have you any children, Mr. Seymour?"

"I have not. I am not married!" said Ralph Seymour in a gasp of agony.

Philip Canning seemed disappointed. He turned to Sinclair Dodds.

"And you, Mr. Dodds?" he inquired.

"I have four—three boys and a girl," said Sinclair Dodds uneasily, not quite certain how this admission would be taken.

"How old is the girl?" asked Philip Canning, and he seemed curious to know.

Sinclair Dodds became confused. His memory played tricks with him.

"Let me see," he said. "They grow up so quickly. It seems only yesterday that she was a school-girl worrying me to play tennis on the hottest of afternoons. She must be about twenty, I think, if my memory is correct."

Philip Canning sighed.

"I had—I *have* a daughter but she is lost," he said, enunciating the "have" with great distinctness and some apparent difficulty. "It would be very painful for me to speak to my friends on the subject and—I have failed to find her. I have come to ask for your advice—if you are willing to give it."

As Sinclair Dodds remarked that night to his wife—a cheery,

buxom little soul who regarded him in the light of a long, thin child—it was not an easy speech for a human being to utter, lay aside a precise, machine-like creation of money and a high business standing.

He did not think out this speech at the time. That came later on with the idea of impressing his wife. He was astounded, absolutely deprived of the power of speech; and so was Ralph Seymour. They sat and stared at their much feared, and greatly revered—in a business sense—senior partner, and he sat like a humble petitioner awaiting a favourable answer. They knew that Philip Canning had a daughter—not that he had ever mentioned the fact, but this . . . !

“I —have —been —perhaps —unkind,” said Philip Canning, enunciating each word as if it required a separate effort to be uttered. He was silent, for a moment, and then he went on more easily. “I have not wished to be unkind, but I have not thought.” He turned to Sinclair Dodds and made a curious, helpless gesture with his hands, oddly reminiscent of the gesture of Little David. “I have never played tennis on a hot afternoon. I have never made it possible for any one to ask me to do so.”

The two junior partners acted in concord and without thought. They rose from their seats, and each grasping a hand of their senior partner, shook it warmly. Then they returned to their chairs and looked accusingly and sheepishly at each other. They were, without doubt, men, who—according to the wife of Sinclair Dodds—sometimes do the the right thing at the right moment.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” said Philip Canning. “I shall not forget this.”

Ralph Seymour found his voice.

“You have always treated us with justice and generosity, Mr. Canning!” he said, defending Philip Canning against himself.

“Perhaps—in a strictly business sense,” said Philip Canning.

The partners were again stricken dumb. The truth is paralyzing at times. They recovered sufficiently, however, to listen with

intelligence to the tale Philip Canning unfolded; but they were too dumbfounded by the entire business to be able to give much advice when the last of it had been told. Ralph Seymour remarked that, since the girl had not appeared at her foster-mother's, the prospect was very black indeed; and that was as far as he could go at the moment.

The remark disclosed a curious fact. Philip Canning had not approached the foster-mother on the subject. He had approached no one that he knew. He said so himself and gave no reason for it. It was the case and he wished it to continue. He had come to them . . . !

As Sinclair Dodds said subsequently, there was more of the old Adam left than he had at first suspected. There was. Philip Canning had travelled a long way down his stony road but he had still a great distance to cover, and the way grew rougher in place of being easier—also his feet grew tired, and weary, and more easily pained.

It was merely life.

The three men sat and discussed the matter for a long time, but they failed to arrive at a satisfactory solution of the difficulty of knowing how best to act. It was an immense relief to Philip Canning to share his burden with others; and his altered bearing showed this. The problem, however, appeared to be too complex to even admit of a feasible line of action. On all sides they were hedged in by Philip Canning's desire for privacy and—when possible—secrecy; and since the police had failed, what remained?

Sinclair Dodds, feeling—with a daughter of his own—that it was up to him to make some brilliant suggestion, addled his already startled faculties to such an extent that he was unable to think coherently. In this state there came to him a sudden memory of John Henry Millman, Little David, and the Dainty Brute, with the crowd around them. He had an insane inspiration.

"My advice," he said with an air of conviction that carried weight, "is to confide the entire story—here in this room—to John

Henry Millman. He, I imagine, is more fitted than most men to give advice on the subject. You remember the day when he saw him in the street with the boy, Mr. Seymour?"

Ralph Seymour sat up with interest.

"I do. I think it a most excellent plan," he said with unexpected assurance, "if Mr. Canning has no objections. No names need be mentioned. He will not ask or be curious as most people would. He will just accept what we say, and he will be vividly interested—of that I am assured. John Henry Millman is much more fitted to advise on a matter like this than we; he has imagination in plenty."

They described how they had witnessed John Henry free Little David from the Dainty Brute. They did not describe Little David's appearance, for, in truth, they had not seen much of him.

The idea was repugnant to Philip Canning and he said so, at once, without hesitation. To appeal to his friends was an idea from which he shrank, but to appeal to John Henry Millman was far worse. It appeared to him in the light of an absolute humiliation of Canning and Canning, and that was more than he could face with calmness. The thought that he had a daughter had grown very large in his mind, and it was a pleasant thought, though also hurtful because she was lost; but he had a long distance to travel along his stony road. He scouted the idea as absurd. Remnants of the old Philip Canning commenced to show in his manner and bearing. He thanked the two partners for their attention and consideration. He expressed the hope that they might see light in the matter, but he made it very apparent that it was told in the deepest of confidence. They would not talk . . . ! The matter almost assumed a business aspect.

They did not talk. Sinclair Dodds went home and immediately explained the entire interview in detail to his wife; and Ralph Seymour cornered an old friend at his club and kept him enthralled for a matter of two hours; but that was nothing. It was merely human nature. They did not talk, and the matter remained secret.

Philip Canning did not forget their advice in relation to John

Henry Millman. He continued to explain, to any one who asked, that his daughter was abroad on account of her health. The house-keeper saw to it that the curiosity of the maids was adequately satisfied. Very few people did ask. They had no interest in her. She had always been kept in the background. This was fortunate for Philip Canning—after a fashion.

The two partners, discussing the astounding business next morning, avoided any mention of Sinclair Dodd's suggestion. They seemed, in fact, to be half ashamed of it, and each afraid of what the other might think; for if the idea had been conceived by Sinclair Dodds, Ralph Seymour had given his heartiest approval. They skirted the subject, for a time, and then Ralph Seymour made a sudden plunge.

"It would be a curious letter to emanate from the offices of Canning and Canning," he said. "The letter asking John Henry Millman to call on a purely personal matter, I mean. It was, perhaps, a mad thought, but there are aspects about it which are decidedly sound, although somewhat remarkable."

There were aspects about the case which made it more remarkable still, but neither Ralph Seymour nor Sinclair Dodds, or indeed Philip Canning himself, had the faintest knowledge or suspicion of them.

Sinclair Dodds saw one aspect, however, that had not occurred to Ralph Seymour.

"I believe," he said, "that it would prove a better method of securing Millman to our firm than any other plan we could imagine or think of. Not that I thought of it at the time. I did not think at all. I just spoke."

This, taking John Henry Millman's peculiarities into due consideration, was little but the simple truth. He was very much attached to men and women, as such, was John Henry Millman; and men and women are rather fine creatures—when you arrive at them and pierce through the mists of self-interest behind which, as a general rule, they stand concealed.

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID NEARLY DISAPPEARS

LITTLE DAVID left the Red House early on the morning after the solemn conclave in the sitting-room; and journeyed up to London along with Veronica, the suit-case, the brown paper parcel, the good wishes of the entire Cornwall family—the doubts and fears of the two elder members included, and the hearty regards of John Henry Millman. The quaint pair travelled in safety, and when he crossed the threshold of John Henry's abode the first thing that Little David saw was the ample figure of Fammy emerging from a door at the end of the passage. The sight delighted Little David and he would have rushed straight into her arms, had he not remembered that he *was* Little David, a person to whom Fammy most strongly objected. The sight did not delight Veronica, for Fammy was emerging from the room commonly known as the "small back." Veronica, in fact, regarded her with great disfavour.

Fammy appeared to be annoyed.

"Them bells!" she said. "If someone does not answer them I shall go down and cut out the tongues. I never heard such a row in my life!"

"Bells," said Veronica shortly, "were made to be rung. There is no harm in that. You will soon get accustomed to them. I am. They never trouble me."

"Who are you?" inquired Fammy fiercely, although it was dark in the passage.

"I am the one that answers them," said Veronica with composure, "and as I've been away for a day and a night I expect they have been ringing most of the time."

"They have," said Fammy. "They just have—like Bedlam!"

"They will continue to ring," said Veronica with great distinctness, "for a long time to come, so I advise you to clear out if you object to the row."

"Well I never!" said Fammy, commencing to bridle. "So this is London manners, is it?"

"For you—yes!" said Veronica. "If you take my advice you will leave at once."

Fammy's indignation was thoroughly aroused and what would have transpired between the pair is hard to imagine, but Little David could stand it no longer.

"Veronica," he said, "you must not speak like that to Fammy. She is my foster-mother!"

He came and stood before Fammy in a contrite and penitent fashion.

Fammy nearly fainted.

She said: "Lord have mercy upon us!" and raised her hands to heaven. She gazed and gasped: "Whatever are you doing here at this time of the morning?" She seized Little David by the arm, dragged him forcibly into the small back, and ejaculated: "It is the little wretch right enough!" She sat down on the edge of the bed, beat her hands together in a frenzy, and asked: "What has she gone and done now? Where has she been all night? What is she doing along with this image with the sharp tongue? Oh my! Oh my!"

Fortunately Fammy did all this in a subdued and muted fashion as if she were not quite certain that she was doing anything at all. It was also fortunate that the bells kept on ringing all the time, otherwise the attention of someone else in that crowded house might have been aroused.

Fammy relapsed into a shaking silence, and Little David unexpectedly asked a question.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Fammy snapped out: "Never mind!" and went on shaking.

Veronica said from the door: "If *he* would think I am safe to leave you with her, I'll do it. Them bells will grow angry in a minute," and she waited for Little David to reply.

Fammy rose in wrath.

"If *he* would think you are safe to leave—!" she gasped, and words failed her. She snatched up a large and ancient umbrella and advanced on Veronica, but that wise person, disappearing with celerity, closed the door behind her.

Fammy turned to Little David and shook the umbreela in his face.

"He!" she said. "What he, may I ask?"

"Sit down, Fammy, and let me tell you everything," said Little David. "I am Little David now in real truth for Mabel Canning is dead. Her father has turned her out."

Fammy dropped the umbrella and seized the slender figure in her arms.

"My precious!" she exclaimed in a tone of horror, "and your old Fammy was away from home at the time! She was not there to take you in and make you welcome; and she up here thinking it might be for your own good too!"

Towards the latter end of this utterance Little David's arms—for some reason unknown—closed in a much tighter grip round Fammy's neck, and he kissed that good soul on the lips.

Whereupon Fammy said sharply: "I came up on business. I wrote you a letter too, yesterday morning, but perhaps you did not get it." Her voice altered and became tender and caressing. "Tell me all about it," she said in the tone of voice that a human being hears from one person only—the woman to whose breasts it has clung for food.

Little David told her. He was still hard at it when Veronica appeared with a very nice breakfast for two on a tray, and a particularly fierce expression on her face. Fammy was nearly the death of both breakfasts. She rose suddenly and insisted on

shaking hands with Veronica in the most assured and friendly fashion.

Veronica said: "This is to be his room," and she pointed to Little David. "There is a cupboard where I can sleep next door. You can have my room, and *he* is in there. That is why I spoke about the bells. If you had not been yourself they would still have been ringing. They would have gone on ringing till you cleared out. See!"

"I see," said Fammy, "and I want to shake that hand of yours again for the same reason. Not that I agree to anything—that is a different matter. I want to hear all about it first of all."

"*He* will be coming up later on in the day," said Veronica.

"What! The blind man!" said Fammy, looking at Little David in some alarm.

"Blind man!" said Veronica in sudden anger. "If it is Mr. John you mean, I'll not listen to it!"

"Well," said Fammy, indicating Little David, "he *was* blind. I'll not say but what he might not be accused of blindness now, but if you had seen——!"

"Don't be so horrid, Fammy," said Little David interrupting. "It is not fair to allow Veronica's nice breakfast go cold."

"All right," said Fammy to Veronica, "I will not say it again. I will think it instead. Not that I wish him to be otherwise—far from it. It's a mercy, as it happens, that he is, well—simple, if that pleases you better."

Veronica looked mutinous but, as she could take no exception to the tone of Fammy's voice, she went away.

"You eat first and tell me afterwards," advised Fammy wisely. "You will be better able to speak, and I will have more sense to listen and not agree."

Little David did this. He also explained, very clearly, that it would be impossible to go home with Fammy and still avoid meeting Philip Canning or any one else connected with him.

"I am to stay here—for a little time at any rate," he said in

conclusion. "I am not afraid to do so either for myself or for any other reason. I want time to think of what I must do. I shall work, too, for I can type and do shorthand. I learnt that when I thought it might please father." He paused and sighed. "I did try to please him, Fammy," he said, and his eyes filled with tears. "I tried hard, but it was no good."

"Of all the wild schemes!" said Fammy, when she had replied suitably to the tail end of Little David's statement. "I never heard one to equal it. The Cornwalls must be mad!"

"They know him, you see. You do not," said Little David, as if this explained everything. "Then they know I am here and will not leave me alone."

"Well," said Fammy, "we shall see. I shall wait on myself, for I came up to have a word with him. I was afraid you might go dancing off like this again, and I was going to—to buy him a pair of spectacles. It seems that I cannot do that now. You must let me judge for myself. You look more decent than I thought you would. That I will admit."

Little David, in a neat suit of dark blue cloth, the jacket of which was long and double-breasted, looked very decent indeed, although absurdly slender and youthful.

John Henry thought so when he arrived in the early forenoon, and Mrs. Baldwin thought so also when she descended from aloft and was introduced to her new lodger. The latter lady was mildly astonished, but as she had been solacing her forced imprisonment in the house during the absence of Veronica with continuous and copious draughts of liquor, she was not quite certain whether she had seen Little David before or not. She accepted, without demur, Veronica's statement that she had found a strange lady occupying her room, for she remembered Fammy distinctly, and she also remembered that the good soul had asked for a bed for one night only. Veronica's room had been empty. It was natural that Mrs. Baldwin should wish to keep the bed aired to safeguard Veronica's health from damage.

She was more than pleased that the small back was let to a brother of John Henry's, and she made no objection to the low figure suggested by Veronica. The room was a bother on account of the communicating door, and John Henry always paid on the nail. He was respectable, too, and that was more than could be said of most people. Veronica liked him, and that also was more than could be said of most people. In fact Mrs. Baldwin was so pleased to see Veronica back again that she would have agreed to anything.

John Henry was astounded at the sight of Fammy, but he was also delighted.

"There now!" he said to Little David. "Could anything have happened more fortunately? Your foster-mother can stay till you are comfortably at home here. I have never been so pleased in all my life."

Fammy was moved to utter a remark after this.

"I came up to see you," she said. "I wanted to take you to a man who makes splendid spectacles, but he is dead so it can't be helped."

John Henry regarded her in some astonishment.

"I assure you," he said in all seriousness, "that there is nothing the matter with my eyes."

Fammy grunted.

Five days later on she departed for her own home. The number of instructions she gave to Veronica, on the night previous to this, could not be counted. The brain would reel at the colossal total. Veronica's brain reeled. In fact it reeled so much that her mouth opened and she uttered uncouth sounds. She had altered her attitude, however, before Fammy ceased to speak. This was fortunate for, if she had not, Fammy might have started it all over again and that would have been a pity.

The first three days John Henry—at his own suggestion—had given up his room to Fammy and ascended nightly to Veronica's

airy nest under the slates; but the last two days Fammy had insisted on his occupying his own bed. The reason she gave for this was that her conscience was troubled. It was. But that which troubled her conscience was not the occupying of John Henry's bed. It is to be presumed, however, that since she departed in a more or less equable frame of mind, she was fairly satisfied with things in general. They had been quite a happy family party in John Henry's room, which was large, airy, and where the bed and such matters stood hidden behind what had once been a screen. Little David seemed happy. Fammy was exceedingly amiable. Veronica was a silent, and very often thoughtful member of the company; and John Henry was in a continual state of enjoyment. Mrs. Baldwin, hearing of this family party, was moved to curiosity but, remembering that Veronica formed part of it, she restrained herself. She had no wish to cross swords with that young woman over any matter whatsoever. She feared that Veronica might spit in her face—an objectionable practice.

John Henry saw Fammy off at Paddington. Then he returned home. She had given him many fragments of advice in relation to his dealings with Little David, and he went over them in his mind as he walked along the streets. The boy was fond of being left alone. He had a morbid dislike of any one intruding into his room. He had an equally morbid dislike of any touching or otherwise handling him—John Henry knew this by experience. He was exceedingly shy, retiring, and delicate-minded. He had even objected to encountering his own father when in night attire—John Henry must bear this in mind. It was the result of a strained condition of nerves, no doubt, and would wear off in time. He must never be allowed to go out by himself, and he must not go out much. He must never go near Paddington station if he wished to avoid the chance of meeting his father, who was occasionally to be seen there. He had a friend of the name of Emma, of whom Fammy approved, and

she was to be allowed to see him whenever he liked; but stray people must be kept out.

Like Veronica, John Henry was a trifle confused by the voluble verbosity of Fammy; but he was quite clear in his own mind as to his course of action. The boy had been unhappy, had received a great shock and been treated abominably. Any mention of his people, or of what had occurred in the past was distasteful, and made him uncomfortable and unhappy. John Henry knew nothing of what his parents were or might be. He simply knew what he could see with his own eyes that he was lost, and helpless, and greatly in want of some one to think of, and look after him. It was quite a sufficient store of knowledge for John Henry Millman.

"I shall look after him as if he were my own brother, and respect him as if he were a sister instead," remarked John Henry to Veronica, as he entered the front door. "Anybody would want to do that, for he repays the slightest attention with interest. I am fortunate to have the opportunity. I am a very lucky man indeed."

Whatever Veronica's thoughts were on the subject she kept them to herself. She made a statement, however, and it was worthy of consideration.

"Quite so," she said shortly, "and I hope you have enough money left to be able to do it. I have been thinking. You will want to work again. You had better let me have what is left and I'll pay it out as it is required. Money is not safe in your hands. I know that from experience."

John Henry regarded Veronica with respect.

"I believe you are right," he said. "I have some one to consider now, and I have never had that before. My money is in the cracked tea-pot on the mantel-shelf. Leave a few shillings, but keep the rest. You are a fount of wisdom, Veronica!"

The thought that he might consider himself, you will observe, was one that had not occurred to John Henry.

Fammy had departed immediately after an early lunch. Little David was not in evidence in John Henry's room, and he remained invisible for the greater part of the afternoon. John Henry would have liked to say a few words on this, their first occasion of being left alone together; but he restrained himself. The boy was in his room and he disliked any intrusion. He moved about, making his sparse belongings appear as attractive as possible; and then he sat down at the table to consider the framework drawn up at the Red House as a possible play of his book. He did not do much work, however, for his thoughts kept straying into the next room; and he commenced to wonder just what the boy could be doing.

It appeared that he must be doing very little, for there was no sound or movement. John Henry listened, grew uneasy, and finally decided that Little David must be resting or asleep. The thought impelled him to perform every action with care to avoid making a noise. In this fashion he dropped his tobacco jar with a crash that made Little David jump and shiver with apprehension. That young gentleman was not asleep or even resting. In fact he appeared to be afflicted with an attack of nerves, and in danger of being scared out of his wits on the slightest provocation. His attention, also, seemed to be concentrated on the room next door, and on a consideration of John Henry's movements.

John Henry smoked and his mind went back to the afternoon when he had wrested the boy from the Dainty Brute. Then he passed on in a natural sequence of thought to the Black Bull at Tipping Horley. There he halted for a little and smiled; but after he had smiled, he frowned and pulled hard at his pipe. The pipe went out, but John Henry went on puffing with unabated vigour. There appeared to be something working in his mind that did not please him. He grew uneasy and restive, made a fresh attempt to work and gave it up, lit his pipe and emitted clouds of smoke, and then jumped from his chair with sudden violence.

“Idiot!” said John Henry in an angry voice. “Worse than an idiot—imbecile!”

Then he remembered that Little David was possibly asleep, and he tiptoed to the communicating door and listened. There was no sound so he felt relieved. He commenced preparations for tea. These he carried out with skill, despatch, and a disregard of the moralities of tea-making that arose from long practice under adverse circumstances. Everything being in readiness he tiptoed to the communicating door, stood silent beside it for a moment, and then knocked. He was assured of his theory that Little David had been asleep, for immediately there came an answering and startled gasp.

“Tea, Little David!” he said in an explanatory voice. “It is all ready and waiting. Will you come in?”

An uncertain and quavering voice was faintly heard to utter: “Yes!”

A fresh thought came to John Henry. The boy might be nervous. He was an exceedingly nervous creature. It was only natural. John Henry refrained from looking at him when he entered in a slow and uncertain fashion. He waited till Little David had sat down and bent over his plate; then he glanced at him swiftly. The boy was nervous. There could be no doubt of it. His hand shook, and his entire figure seemed to be in a state of unrest. His colour came and went, and his breathing was somewhat irregular. There was an alarmed, defensive expression on his face, too, when John Henry was able to see it properly.

This affected John Henry, and they ate in silence. John Henry was annoyed with himself—exceedingly annoyed with himself—and he found speech difficult. He made a few extraordinary remarks, to which Little David responded with equally strange answers. There was an air of great discomfort about the entire proceedings that was very far from what John Henry had imagined would be the case.

It was very annoying.

The worst of it all was that, do what he might, John Henry was unable to get away from thinking about the night spent at the Black Bull. Not that there was any reason why he should wish not to think about that night, but it was the trend of his thoughts which annoyed him. You will remember the baleful influence of the objectionable pyjamas, and how much they worried and disgusted him; well, it was the same thing now, only it was worse because there were no pyjamas, nothing, except Little David crouched in a chair and obviously ill at ease.

John Henry was more than annoyed with himself—he was disgusted. He recalled the fact that, for weeks, he had been unable to concentrate and work; and he sprang out of his chair and poked the fire with such unnecessary vigour that a hot cinder jumped out and landed on the sleeve of his coat. He did not perceive this, but Little David did.

“You will be burning in a moment,” he said in alarm, and he sprang from his chair, lifted the glowing ember, cast it in the fire, and stopped the cloth from smouldering. There was a large round hole on John Henry’s sleeve just beside the bend of the elbow.

Having done these things Little David thrust the fingers of his left hand into his mouth and danced. John Henry relinquished the poker in great distress.

“You might have hurt yourself badly,” he said. “You should not have done that! It did not matter about my coat.”

“You might have been hurt yourself,” retorted Little David, still dancing. “I did not think about your coat.”

Having said this he suddenly flushed scarlet, forgot about the pain in his fingers, ceased his dancing, and sat down in his chair in an even greater state of discomfort and apprehension.

John Henry, thrusting his hands into his pockets, walked to the window and stared out at the back yard. He did the first action because his hands had felt impelled to grasp the hands of Little David—the boy disliked being touched. He did the second

action for two reasons. For one because he could see the discomfort on the boy's face and it pained him to see it there. For another because he was desirous of speaking about himself.

"I'm a funny animal," he said, "and you must put up with me. I act, often, without thought and with small consideration for other people. Take the night we spent at the Black Bull for example." He paused, and it was as well that he continued to stare out of the window, for Little David had stiffened and sat grasping the arms of his chair as if prepared for immediate flight. "You were unhappy, disturbed, scared out of your wits, and all my attention should have been concentrated on you to try and ease matters—it was not. I lay in bed and thought about—about myself in a fashion that I should have been ashamed of. I was, too, but that made no difference. It was the fault of these wretched, female pyjamas, I suppose. You are only a boy and would not understand if I explained. What I want to convey is that if I seem moody, and rude, and do things abruptly, it has nothing to do with you. It is only my own wretched little nature asserting itself in an annoying fashion. Just pay no attention."

Little David sat back suddenly in his chair and disappeared from sight behind his hands.

"My intentions are good," said John Henry, turning from the window and coming back slowly, "but I am a fool. I like you immensely and want to make you happy and entirely at ease, yet I always seem to affect you with nerves when we are alone together. It must be my odd manners and my habit of thinking about myself. I can come to no other conclusion; but if there is anything else, just tell me and I shall try to rectify it."

Little David arose suddenly and commenced to clear away the tea-things, a process which necessitated his moving to the other end of the room, and during which he kept his back turned on John Henry as much as possible.

"I—I don't think there is anything," he said.

John Henry allowed him to carry on unassisted, for the back

view of the boy had made him jump to the conclusion that he desired to keep his face hidden. He did.

"There is nothing," said Little David, a few seconds later, and the tone of his voice had altered. "It is all my own fault. I was afraid that you might think me a bother."

As John Henry remarked to Veronica, when she came in later on, it was the most absurd idea he had ever heard in his life. Veronica allowed the remark to pass without comment. There was a new piece of furniture in the room, too, that she had never seen before; and this she also allowed to pass without comment. It stood at right angles to the table where John Henry wrote, and it also was a table. A small portion of the rubbish—Veronica looked on all odd paper as rubbish—from John Henry's table had been transferred to it, and lay there in neat little heaps, and in the midst of these reposed John Henry's typewriter. At the table, with a heightened colour and a pleased, excited expression on his face, sat Little David. John Henry occupied the hearth-rug and contemplated this combination with enjoyment. Veronica passed to her accustomed seat in silence.

"I must start work in earnest to-morrow," said John Henry, apparently carrying on a conversation broken by the entrance of Veronica. "I have the idea of this play in my head, but as I have never tried to do such a thing before, it will not be easy to get it out. You will be an immense help especially as you can read my writing. It is a splendid idea. What do you think, Veronica?"

"Splendid!" said Veronica in a dry voice, "and quite necessary. You had better start to-night."

"Working, I mean," she added, in response to John Henry's glance of astonishment. "You must be thinking of something, and that will be better for you than anything else. Anyway you must make money—now."

"I must," said John Henry, "but I keep forgetting about it. I must start right away. This play has got to be a success."

He was puzzled, however, at the first part of Veronica's remark,

and at the tone of her voice. Little David, it may be remarked, was not. It might also be mentioned that it was the first and last acid remark uttered by Veronica about the new occupant of John Henry's room of an evening. Little David, who was wise in odd ways, remembered that it was the first night; and he determined to come presently and sit beside her. He did this, as it happened, much sooner than he had anticipated.

"You have burnt your coat," said Veronica to John Henry. "Take it off and let me patch the hole," and she held out her hand for the garment in question.

Little David arose hurriedly and came over to the fire; whereupon John Henry, suddenly mindful of Fammy's manifold instructions, retired behind the screen. While there he distinctly heard Veronica say: "You cannot do two things at once. No one can." Her voice was kindly, and it also seemed to hold a note of warning; whereat John Henry was astonished. He was still more astonished, when he reappeared, to see that Little David appeared to be crestfallen, and that Veronica's hand remained outstretched.

"I can darn," said Little David, and the line of his mouth became suddenly straight. "I was taught at school. Give it to me. Veronica works too hard all day. She must not work here at night."

John Henry did so with great pleasure. He went to his table, sat down there, and glowed all over at this wonderful action of Little David; but presently the manuscript before him claimed his attention. He grew interested, absorbed, and finally lost. He worked. When it was apparent that he was thoroughly lost, Little David paused in his task and made a statement to Veronica in a vehement whisper.

"I *do* think you work too hard, and you must *not* work here at night. I thought that long before you mentioned the coat. You *do* believe me?"

Veronica in a muted whisper conveyed the assurance that she did.

Little David went on darning and Veronica sat up long past her

accustomed time for departure because she knew that he wished to finish the task. It was a perfect work of art, that patch, and so skilfully done that John Henry—he had forgotten all about the hole by morning—did not notice it for days. This was rather hard on Little David, but he said nothing, and when John Henry did notice it he was so exceedingly pleased and contrite that the omission became rather a good thing than otherwise.

It was past eleven o'clock before the matter was completed to the satisfaction of the worker, and by then John Henry was absolutely and completely lost in his task.

"Good-night, Veronica," he said, as they rose to go to bed.

"I am not away yet," said Veronica, very distinctly. "I shall be back to do up the fire—after Little David is settled for the night."

This, it may be remarked, became a regular habit of Veronica's. John Henry looked up from his work and smiled.

"Good-night, Little David," he said. "Tap on the wall if anything goes wrong."

Little David did not tap, so it is presumed that nothing went wrong. He did not go to sleep, however, but lay awake for a long time; till, in fact, John Henry went to bed. All this time one thought kept recurring to his mind. It was: "He had forgotten about me entirely." He had. This thought did not seem to please Little David, but when he fell asleep there was a smile on his lips.

John Henry, having reached a point in his labours, ceased to work and arose with an exclamation of fatigue. He pushed back his chair and then he said: "Oh!" and lifted it with care. He went on tiptoe out into the passage, listened for a moment at Little David's door, and returning to his room, undressed in a silent and noiseless fashion and crept into bed.

Little David fell asleep on a fresh thought, and it was that which caused him to smile. It was: "Whenever he stopped working, he remembered." He had done so. This thought pleased Little David so much that he determined to remain awake every night

when John Henry became lost in his work. He did not succeed in doing this, of course, but he did do so on a great number of occasions; and on none of them was he ever in any way disappointed.

It was all very odd and startling. Little David thought so when he was left alone. He had thought this so strongly on the first afternoon that—for several hours—he was in great danger of disappearing altogether. He nearly did disappear, you will remember, for he vanished at one time behind his hands.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TWO BEAUTIFUL CREATURES GROW IMPATIENT

GEORGE CORNWALL and Muggie, about this time, were subject to sudden fits of nerves and depression during which they looked darkly at each other and imagined terrible things. The procedure, on these occasions, was invariably the same. Muggie told George Cornwall what she thought about him and the world in general. This drove him out into the garden. Then she relented and joined him there and he told her what he thought himself. This sent them back into the house together. There they sought out Sheila and drenched her with a flow of excited and reproachful talk. Whereupon Sheila sent for young George and crushed him with bitter reproaches—young George had no objection to this for she invariably made up for it afterwards; but that is of no consequence.

It was all the fault of young George. He had first thought of Mabel Canning appearing at the Red House as Little David. He had—at the instigation of Sheila and Mabel, but the latter fact never transpired at any of these moments of emotion.

Young George invariably bore the burden of the fears, and doubts, and accusations, of the rest of the family with patience till he thought that the storm had almost blown itself out. Then he made the same suggestion. He would go up to London at once, visit John Henry Millman on the pretext of inquiring about the progress of his play, and bring back a precise report of the state of affairs. These reports were always favourable. John Henry was absorbed and working hard. Little David was happy and also working hard. There was no sign or indication of Mabel Canning to be seen. Veronica had assured him that there was no

necessity to worry. Mrs. Baldwin continued to spend her evenings out, and Veronica her evenings in. He, George, might have saved the train fare and remained at home. Peace and quiet would then descend on the Red House, and life go on as usual.

This had happened on several occasions, then one morning, in the midst of an exceptionally fierce oration from George Cornwall, the telephone bell rang and Sheila, going to answer, returned with a scared face and the news that Philip Canning was on the wire. He desired speech with George Cornwall, and the tone of his voice was ominous.

The Cornwall family was shaken to the core. They looked at one another, and all, with one accord, followed their head and master as he walked hurriedly, but nervously, out of the room. George Cornwall had just been explaining that he was the head and master of the Red House, that his views must be taken seriously, but he would gladly have relinquished the post and title at that moment. The instrument was one of these trying affairs, secured to the wall, up to which it is necessary to stand to attention. George Cornwall was a short man. He was also fat. He stood at attention, and the family clustered round him, mutely sympathetic and exceedingly apprehensive. His answers, which were brief and breathless, filled them with foreboding; and when he replaced the receiver and swung round gasping and red in the face, they were prepared for the worst. The words which came, however, filled them with astonishment.

"That man should be—awakened," said George Cornwall fiercely. "That is if anything on earth can arouse him to the fact that he is alive." He breathed hard for a moment. "I shall go up to London myself and pay Millman a visit, and Muggie will come with me. You had better go and start searching for your aunt's clothes, Sheila, at once!"—there was always a species of struggle before Muggie departed to catch a train—"We will just be in time for the express if you hurry up."

The Cornwall family regarded their head in a horror-stricken

fashion. His tone of decision and authority was both unusual and perturbing.

"What did he say about Mabel? Does he suspect us?" asked Sheila breathlessly.

"Say!" ejaculated George Cornwall, waving his arms about in a foolish fashion for a fat man confronted by his family. "Not one word! He never mentioned her name. That is why I am so annoyed. He has no right to behave like that. It is not kind, or decent, or even human. He knows you are her friend and she might be dead or worse than dead. He rang up—on a matter of business connected with John Henry Millman's play. He has found a producer willing and eager to have the book dramatized, and he wishes to waste no time because it will be good from a business point of view, so would I see the man at once and introduce him to Millman! A business point of view when your own child is lost and possibly suffering tortures! It makes me sick."

George Cornwall hurried Muggie out of the room in search of her clothes—not that I mean to suggest she had no clothes on at the time—far from it, but, like most ladies, it was not possible for her to go unexpectedly out in the clothes she was wearing at the moment—and followed himself, fuming, and fretting, and uttering remarks on the subject of graven images and other equally strange topics amongst which Philip Canning was included. He was very far from suspecting that the loss of Mabel had anything to do with the finding of a producer for John Henry's play. Indeed the thought never entered his head, but it had. Philip Canning had not forgotten the advice of Sinclair Dodds, although pride still sealed his lips, and every other effort to locate or even discover a faint trace of Mabel had proved fruitless. Philip Canning was suffering. Of this, however, George Cornwall was ignorant.

"I shall drive them over to the station," remarked Sheila to young George. "I do not like this business at all. There is no telling what old George might say or do, and I do not see why he wants Muggie to go up as well. Run and get the car ready like a good

boy while I hurry Muggie, otherwise they will not have time to buy tickets. I have a good mind to break down half way to the station. I must think."

George Cornwall, however, was taking no risks.

"I am going to drive myself," he announced at the last moment. "You and George can walk over and bring the car back. I shall leave it at the station. No one will want to run away with the thing, and if they do, we can buy a new one. It is insured against loss."

They departed in state to the accompaniment of groans from the car, and uneasy glances from George and Sheila. After lunch these two young people walked over to Tipping Horley in a depressed and somewhat strained silence, the result of a morning spent in argument which had led to no result. They found the car, climbed in, and proceeded to return. Passing the Black Bull, Sheila had a sudden memory of John Henry's remarks about the odd man. She stopped the car, commanded George to get out, find the man, and bring him to her. George obeyed without question.

The odd man was out. He was always out, according to the stout gentleman with the red face. He was the laziest, most good-for-nothing rascal on the face of the earth. When he was not going over to Crompton, he was going up to London. The stout gentleman, who was our old friend the landlord of the Black Bull, stated that he had no idea why he retained him in his service—no idea whatever. At one time the odd man had never gone out and never done any work. Now he was always going out and always working hard when he was in. The man was a regular vexation!

George carried this intelligence to Sheila and waited for instructions. She sat and frowned, for a moment, then her face cleared and she told him to jump in. He did, and she promptly turned the car and set off in the opposite direction. George preserved a dignified silence but, at length, his curiosity overcame him.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To Crompton to see the odd man," said Sheila gaily. "I have an idea."

"The Lord preserve us!" said George piously.

Sheila's idea proved correct. They found the odd man seated in Fammy's kitchen, and Fammy was in the act of administering tea—a very nice and homely tea—to that worthy man. They all had tea. George, with the certainty that Sheila had some plan in her head, was disturbed. Sheila appeared to be greatly excited. Fammy was distracted; and the odd man, at the sight of the strangers, retired at once into the profoundest depths of gloom, although he had been almost cheerful, judging by his expression, when they arrived.

"We came over to see you," said Sheila, beaming on the odd man.

The odd man retired behind at least six additional degrees of gloom, and his eyes commenced to play a game of trying to see which could look the furthest away from her face; otherwise he gave no sign that he was conscious of being addressed.

"We wanted to hear how Mr. Millman and Little David were getting on, and what you think of it all," continued Sheila.

George—he did not even know who Fammy was—gave indications of a desire to flee. Fammy—she was in the act of lifting the kettle off the fire—commenced to drench the bread with the hot water. This action eased the situation.

"I did not go to do it," she remarked, when the matter had been rectified, "but you spoke so sudden-like. I have always heard Miss Mabel say that you were sudden-like," she added, pausing and mopping her face which had grown somewhat flushed.

"She is. There is no one like her," said George, with enthusiasm and fervour.

"The truth is George and I are worried about Little David," said Sheila, "and we do not quite know what to do. Father and Muggie have gone up to town and they intend to call on Mr. Millman. There is no telling what may have happened before they

return. Then we are worried because nothing *has* happened. I have not seen Little David since he left our house. None of us have except George here, and his accounts are quite inadequate. I had a sudden inspiration outside the Black Bull when I thought that you have never said a word to us about the matter, and I sent George in for the odd man. Then we came on here. I guessed that he knew you and came over here every now and then."

As she said this Sheila glanced from Fammy to the odd man with a twinkle in her eye.

"A man has to be somewhere," said the odd man in a melancholy voice. "One place is much the same as another."

"Quite so," said Sheila gravely, "that is just what I thought myself. John Henry Millman told me a little about you. I felt assured that you had been in London at least once since Mrs. Bluebell left there."

Fammy became animated. She awoke from the confused state into which this passage of arms between Sheila and the odd man seemed to have sent her.

"He has," she said. "He has been a regular blessing to me, that man. How do you think I could have sat here in comfort not knowing how Miss Mabel was going on, if it had not been for him? He has been arriving with the milk at Paddington more mornings than I care to think of considering the cost of travelling; and coming back in the next train with messages from Veronica. He has not seen Miss Mabel because——"

Fammy paused abruptly. The odd man had suddenly extended a long, lean hand in her direction, and made a species of pass as if about to commence an incantation.

"A man can only see what is there," he said, with conviction. "I saw the young lady once—at the Black Bull, but there is nothing up in London but Little David. That is what I was saying when you came in."

Sheila nodded with an air of great wisdom.

"Just what George and I were worried about," she said. "We must do something to rectify the matter."

This being quite a fresh aspect of the case for George, he looked both astonished and indignant.

"Well, I never—" he commenced, but Sheila cut him short.

"Of course you did not," she said. "None of us did. We never expected Little David to remain so long in existence. It is not right. It is not even decent. The poor child must be worried to death. Something must be done at once."

"She is happy," said Fammy, immediately becoming defensive. "There is no harm in that. She is living quiet, and decent-like, and she works hard. They both work hard. Little David is a lot happier than Mabel Canning ever was, and it is not me that would have it otherwise. He treats her like a brother, and that does no harm either."

"If Mabel Canning is not in love with John Henry Millman by this time—she ought to be," said Sheila. "What I want to know is if he is in love with her?"

Fammy bristled with indignation.

"What right has the man not to be in love with her, seeing as how he has seen her?" she demanded. "What right has any man not to be in love with my Mabel?" She waited for an answer and as none was forthcoming ended triumphantly: "None whatever!"

"There are some that might think otherwise," said the odd man suddenly, and his one eye rested for a second on the face of young George who, from that moment onwards, looked on him with approval.

Fammy, in the most unexpected fashion, took no exception to this remark, except for the fact that her face grew a trifle red. No doubt this was caused by the effort to refrain from contradicting a guest in her own house.

"Veronica's opinion," pursued the odd man, "is that he is in love with her, that he has been in love with her from the first day

they met; but that he is the last person on the earth to find it out, for he seldom thinks of himself. Not that he has any objections to marriage, but it would not occur to him that anyone would ever want to marry him."

"How do you know he has no objections to marriage?" asked Sheila incautiously.

The odd man became abstracted.

"A man constructs his own thoughts on other people," he said. "The other day he was talking to me about two people—two beautiful young creatures he called them, and he said he wondered they did not grow impatient."

"Oh!" said Sheila, and she flushed and then laughed. "They are growing impatient, but not about themselves."

"All a matter of opinion," said George thoughtfully, but no one paid any attention to him.

Sheila sat silent for a time, immersed in thought, and then she sprang to her feet and hustled the two male things out of the room.

"I have another idea," she said. "I want to speak to Fammy by herself. You keep him outside, George, and we can take him back to Tipping Horley—that is if he wants to go."

Half an hour later on Sheila and Fammy emerged from the cottage, and there was an air of suppressed excitement about them both that George regarded with suspicion. He passed no comment but started the engine of the car. Fammy came out and stood beside them in the road, and she seemed to be a trifle doubtful and uncertain.

"You will hear what your father and your aunt have to say," she remarked to Sheila, "and that may alter things a little. You must let me know, too, everything that happens. I will not have my little girl made unhappy."

"Of course not," said Sheila, "and I shall come over and tell you everything. It will be great sport and you must not spoil it. It is only right, too, of that I am assured."

The car moved away. Fammy stood and watched it disappear round the bend of the road, and she stood and watched the bend of the road for a long time after it had disappeared. Then she went back to the kitchen and commenced to wash up. She did so in a spasmodic fashion which showed that her thoughts were not on the job in hand; and when she was half way through she made a remark, and that appeared to ease her mind, for then she went on in her customary and business-like fashion.

"She is a good-hearted girl. She likes Mabel and wants to help her," said Fammy, "but she is a woman, and there is a grudge working in her mind because Little David is going about in trousers. Funny creatures we are!" She lifted a clean cup and slipped it back into the basin in a moment of abstraction. "Well, I need not talk. I was just the same myself when I first saw her!"

Fammy, it is presumed, was talking about Sheila.

That young woman met her father and aunt at the station, in the early evening, and drove them back to the Red House in the car. George Cornwall appeared to be excited, and Muggie also seemed stirred out of her normal and placid state of calm. Sheila asked no questions on the way, but when they arrived at the Red House she shepherded them into the sitting-room, called for George, and demanded a full and detailed statement of all and everything that had transpired. George Cornwall was more than willing to give this. He started off at once, and he talked without ceasing for three quarters of an hour. At the end of that time he paused to take breath, and Sheila withered him with a remark.

"And this," said Sheila in tones of disgust, "is the man who was angry with Philip Canning for not mentioning his daughter!"

George Cornwall had not said one word about Little David, or made the slightest reference to his curious position in the habitation of John Henry Millman. He had confined his attention to John Henry's play, to the astounding fact that it was finished, to

the equally astounding fact that it was to be produced without delay, and to a description of his own, Muggie's, and the producer's enthusiasm on the subject.

George Cornwall was slightly discomfited, but he recovered in a second.

"There is no necessity to say anything about that," he said. "The man has had no time or energy to spare. He has not had an opportunity to grow suspicious. There is no reason why he should. Little David is happy, and contented, and working with him. They suit each other admirably, and Millman is sincerely attached to the boy. There were moments when I forgot that he was not a boy myself. Time enough to worry when there is something to worry about. At present while they are busy over this play, there is no reason for us to grow excited. There is a rotten piece losing money at the Bigpit Theatre in spite of an excellent cast. So soon as—"

"The best paying house in London!" interrupted young George in a voice of excitement.

"Go away!" said Sheila in disgust. "You are a disgrace with your plays. Go away both of you and let me talk to Muggie. You inhuman monsters!"

Muggie had not much to say. They had found John Henry at his table, and Little David at *his* table—both busy. It was all so natural that Muggie had lost sight of Little David's sex, and found it again with a start. Little David had proved of invaluable assistance to John Henry; and she, Muggie, recalling how pathetic and wistful Mabel Canning had been, could not find it in her heart to condemn the deception. She had made the attempt and failed. That had been when John Henry and George Cornwall departed together to interview the theatrical gentleman. Muggie was of the opinion that it must soon come to an end, but that, for the present, matters should be left as they stood.

To all this Sheila made no response other than to look thoughtfully at the fire.

Muggie was moved to add a few words on the subject of Canning and Canning.

"I do not wonder they asked George to try and gain Millman's interest by suggesting a dramatization of his book," she said.

"He showed us their agreement. I know little about these matters, but what poor Millman is going to make out of it will not amount to much. Your father grew excited. Millman seemed astonished. He said it had not occurred to him in that light. I do not suppose he even thought about the money. I do not believe he would now, if it were not for Little David. He had dismissed the idea, but when he looked at the boy he immediately became thoughtful."

"Was Little David there at the time?" asked Sheila.

Muggie nodded.

"Yes," she said. "It was rather hard luck. Your father should not have said so much. Little David's face was a study. Philip Canning will have little mercy from his daughter if he chances to meet her again. I believe Mabel Canning will bear more resentment over that, than over what he said to herself. I expected the subject would be broached afterwards, when we were alone, but it was not. The matter went too deep for words."

"You mean?" said Sheila interrogatively.

"My dear," said Muggie, "if you had heard the tone of voice in which Little David said: 'Doing this to you when he is so rich himself!' you would not ask me what I mean. It was then I remembered Little David's sex. The remark fitted in with your father's conversation and passed unnoticed; but I am not dead to the realities of life yet, although I am growing old."

"You will never grow old," said Sheila, kissing her affectionately. "I shall attend to that."

At dinner George Cornwall laid down his knife and fork and regarded Sheila with suspicion.

"I can see," he said, "that you are about to do something you should not. I know the signs only too well. What is it now?"

Sheila strenuously affirmed her innocence, but directly the meal was over she beckoned young George into the privacy of the drawing-room; and they were closeted there for a long time. They emerged, finally, and stood in the hall, and the face of George was somewhat puzzled and doubtful. The face of Sheila, on the other hand, was flushed and exceedingly mischievous. That a doubt preyed on George's mind was made apparent by his words.

"I agree," he said, "and am quite willing to do anything reasonable to help matters on, but why you should have spent so much time explaining it, beats me altogether. You must have some wild scheme in your head. I have a presentiment of evil in my bones!"

"I shall go and see Little David myself," said Sheila, "and then I may have a little more to say on the subject."

"I knew it," said George with a groan. "We shall all be in the hands of the police, or the bailiffs, or—you!"

"Don't be rude," said Sheila, and she commenced to mount the stairs.

"I wish," said George, disconsolately yet watching her with approval, "that I knew what is in your head."

Sheila paused—she was half-way up the stairs by this time, and peered down over the banisters.

"The two beautiful young creatures grow impatient," she chanted, with a mischievous grin, "even as John Henry Millman prophesied. How do you know that my head is not full of impatience?"

Being already half-way up stairs she gained her room before George could catch her.

Sheila was a girl of great wisdom.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID DETERMINES TO REMAIN FOR EVER

JOHN HENRY MILLMAN, emerging from a period of work and abstraction, looked round on his household gods and felt satisfied. He was pleasantly exhausted and anticipated a period of rest and amusement. He was greatly appreciative of the efforts of Little David in relation to his work, and he explained this to that young gentleman in a fitting and pleasing fashion, whereat Little David seemed highly gratified. He went on to outline a possible programme for the next few days in which Little David and he were to do a number of pleasing and innocent things together, and Little David appeared to awaken to a fresh and vivid interest in life. Veronica, who was present at this point—it was on the evening after George Cornwall had departed to Tipping Horley and John Henry's play had departed into the hands of the theatrical gentleman—said nothing, but she sniffed. Little David appeared to object to that sniff.

They all sat round the fire, and Little David sat directly opposite to John Henry with the light full on his face. Veronica—between the two—suddenly became aware of the fact that John Henry was studying the boy with unwarranted attention. She grew uneasy, complained that the light was annoying her eyes, and rose to lower the gas. Little David, who had been staring at the fire with a fierce expression on his face, came back as if from a vast distance, and the line of his mouth—it had been very straight—altered and softened. He had been thinking of Philip Canning, and also of George Cornwall's words on the subject of John Henry's agreement.

John Henry puffed at his pipe in a profound and meditative fashion.

Veronica became suddenly afflicted with nerves so that she asked a question.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Little David's face," said John Henry absently, and as he vouched no further information but went on puffing in the same meditative fashion, it is to be presumed that he continued to do so.

Little David's face grew first red and then pale.

"I—I think I shall go to bed," he said abruptly. "I am very tired."

Veronica approving heartily of this idea, John Henry raised no objection although the hour was early. He continued to smoke, and presently Veronica returned and sat down beside him. John Henry consumed several pipes before Veronica could summon up sufficient courage to ask a second question but, eventually, she did.

"What is the matter with it?" she asked.

John Henry seemed startled.

"The matter with what?"

"The boy's face," said Veronica shortly.

"Little David's face," repeated John Henry in an amazed voice, "why nothing, of course! There was an expression about his mouth as he sat staring at the fire that reminded me of somebody I know, and I was trying to remember who it is, but I cannot."

"Was that all?" asked Veronica, and she seemed to be half disappointed and half relieved.

"It was," said John Henry, still surprised, and then he added swiftly: "I have not hurt his feelings, have I? I was thinking aloud. He is such an odd, sensitive little creature, and I am so clumsy and unthinking. He does not imagine that I have any objection to his face?"

"No—not that," said Veronica. "I just wondered, that was all. He is tired, he has been as excited over this play of yours as if he had written it himself."

"He has," said John Henry with feeling, "and he is still. I wanted to take him with me when I go to the theatre for rehearsals, but he will not come. He wants to wait and see it when it comes on as a finished article. He has been a great help to me—like yourself, Veronica. Everybody seems to help me these days. It is extraordinary."

Veronica, announcing her intention of going straight to bed, left the room without more ado; but she did not go straight to bed. She paid a visit to Little David instead, and held a whispered conversation with that young gentleman for a considerable time. Even then she did not carry out her original intention, for she poked her head into John Henry's room and made a remark which surprised him.

"There is one person who will never do that," said Veronica, darkly, "and he is—yourself."

After this Veronica closed the door, and really did go to bed.

John Henry pondered this odd remark of Veronica's and came to the conclusion that she must be suffering from over-work. He embarked on a dream where he succeeded—by means of his pen, a vague dream indeed!—in making enough money to live in a house of his own, and the working of this dream was beneficial to Veronica. Little David came into it, and at that he smiled. The dream, oddly enough, stopped there, for he commenced to visualize the boy's face; and after he had been doing this for some little time with a softened expression, he sprang to his feet in a fury.

"You should be thoroughly ashamed," he remarked to himself. "If you are going to start off again like that, it will be a nice business!"

He proceeded to go to bed with as little noise as possible, but he went out into the passage—as a matter of custom—to see that Little David's light was out, and he stood listening for a moment to assure himself that all was well for the night.

Little David, who had been kept awake by his thoughts, heard

him and came to a conclusion in that moment. Little David, when once his mind was made up, was an exceedingly determined little person.

"Ever since the night in the Black Bull . . ." muttered John Henry as he turned off the light. "If there were any reason for it . . ." he continued as he slipped into bed. "There can be no reason. It is all nonsense. I know no one. Even if I did, it would be all nonsense . . ." he ended, and he fell asleep on the thought.

John Henry's plans for a few quiet days with Little David did not materialize. This was due to the presence of two letters which came by the first post next morning. The one was for John Henry and it fixed an appointment for that afternoon with the theatrical gentleman, at which other theatrical ladies and gentlemen would be present. The other was for Little David and it stated that Sheila Cornwall was coming to see them. It also stated a number of other small points, but on the subject of these Little David preserved a dignified silence.

John Henry departed at two-fifteen, and Sheila arrived at two-thirty. The two young people, being sincerely attached to each other, were delighted to meet. They embraced, and kissed, and then they sat down. At least Little David sat down. Sheila remained standing, and she studied her friend with attention and a scrutiny that made Little David move uneasily and almost disappear. The chances are that he would have disappeared, for a time at least, if it had not been for the fact that he had reached a decision, late on the previous night, to remain for ever.

"Well, Miss, what have you to say for yourself?" demanded Sheila.

"Quite a lot," said Little David, and he commenced to give a detailed description of his doings, and the doings of John Henry, Veronica, and Mrs. Baldwin. He spoke at some length on the subject of John Henry's play, on John Henry's work, and on his own efforts to help him.

Sheila listened to all this with a frowning impatience, and when Little David was silent she said:

“Now, go on and tell me what I want to hear?”

There was, apparently, nothing more to tell.

Sheila arose and shook Little David, but that had no result other than a heightened colour brought on by the exercise, and a straightening of Little David's mouth, occasioned, no doubt, by the unexpectedness of the action. She desisted suddenly from this occupation, and it seemed as if she were neither surprised, nor displeased, that it had not jogged the memory of Little David in any way.

She returned to her chair and regarded him fixedly, and his appearance seemed to aggravate her in some subtle fashion.

“Very well, young man,” she said, “only do not come to me and say I was unwilling to help you.”

Little David ignored this remark and, fortunately, Veronica appeared at this moment with tea. The said tea, it should be noted, did not belong to John Henry, or Veronica, or even Mrs. Baldwin. It was entirely—dishes and all—the property of the first floor front who was out for the day. As this fact remained locked in the bosom of Veronica, it did no harm to anyone. When John Henry returned he found the three of them talking with animation and Mrs. Baldwin shouting herself hoarse at the foot of the back stairs. Veronica, receiving the latter piece of information with composure, departed to save the unfortunate lady from entirely losing her voice.

John Henry threw himself into a chair, accepted a cup of tea, and drank it with all the appearance of one consuming a portion—a word I have borrowed from Lyons' tea-shop menu—of poison. He groaned once or twice, made feeble motions with his hands, and he seemed to be thoroughly and entirely shattered. He had the appearance of a man who has been out in a whirlwind after having passed through a mangle.

Little David was immediately alarmed, a fact at which Sheila's eyes danced and twinkled.

"Whatever has happened?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

John Henry regarded him with a blank stare, and then his face softened and he smiled.

Sheila's eyes ceased to twinkle at this point, and the expression of irritation returned to her face.

"What a relief it is to have you here," said John Henry, and he appeared to be grateful for it. "I believe I should go mad by myself. If I thought you were thinking of running away, I would fix a chain to your leg."

"I am never going away at all," said Little David with decision, and then he coloured and cast a scared glance at Sheila.

That young woman ignored both the remark and the glance.

"What is the trouble?" she asked John Henry.

"When they were not all talking at once, one of them had got me into a corner and was telling me just what he, or she, was specially fitted for," said John Henry. "Then there was the producer, and he has ideas. Also there were a number of other gentlemen who all seemed to have thought a lot, but what they all were I do not know. All I know is that they told me all about it. No two of them thought the same, and not one of them thought what I think myself. It was terrible—terrible!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Sheila.

"These theatrical people who imagined that they were talking about my play," said John Henry in a hopeless voice.

Sheila laughed—Little David looked daggers at her, although the laugh was not unkind—then she appeared to have a brain-wave. She took it very quietly, however, and her voice was quite calm, but her face glowed with mischief.

"You want someone to go there and protect you," she said. "I have a great mind to come up to Town and help you myself. I know how to deal with these people. They are the best-natured crowd on the earth once you understand how to take them."

"If you would," said John Henry, grasping at the thought, "it

would be a most kind action. How can I agree to what everybody wants if they all want something different?"

"You certainly require some one to look after you in this business," said Sheila with decision, "and neither George nor father can do so just now."

"Why?" asked Little David abruptly.

"Because they are too busy," said Sheila. "They have not been so busy for months."

Little David, for some unknown reason, appeared to be disturbed at the thought.

"I wish I could help you," he said to John Henry, and there was a wistful note in his voice, "but I cannot. I should be useless in every sense of the word."

John Henry immediately abandoned all thought of his theatrical complications.

"Help me!" he said. "You do help me. This play would never have been finished if you had not been here. The mere sight of your face helps me, because when I look at you I forget about my worries. You are a perfect God-send to me in every way."

This remark, while it appeared to please Little David, seemed to have an adverse effect on Sheila. She rose and announced her intention of departing, and this she carried out forthwith.

"I shall talk over the matter of giving you a little assistance with father and George," she said at parting, "and let you know."

John Henry, seizing both her hands, clasped them warmly. Sheila returned the pressure with interest. John Henry—not to put too fine a point on it—was astonished. The train moving out at that moment—he had accompanied her to the station, leaving Little David alone—he was forced to walk down the platform for a few steps before he could free himself from her clasp. He returned home in slight bewilderment brought on by a radiant and beaming smile, and a frantically waving handkerchief.

John Henry decided that it was very odd. It was. Later on he decided that it must have been his imagination. It was not. Later

on still—it was about ten o'clock and Little David had departed into a dream over an odd and unpublished fragment penned by John Henry in his extreme youth—he came to the conclusion that, if it had not been his imagination, then he might be justified in entertaining the thoughts which kept crowding into his head. Since it was all imagination, he commenced to work on a new idea brought to life by Little David's expression, and he worked hard. When he paused to consider the same, however, he found that it was more disturbing than his imaginings.

"I do not understand myself at odd moments," said John Henry, but as both Veronica and Little David had departed for the night, and he made no further statement, it can only be left at that.

Perhaps he did not.

About the same time, in the sitting-room of the Red House, Sheila gave voice to this very opinion. Muggie and George Cornwall had retired for the night, and the two young people were seated one on either side of the fire. They had been seated there for some time, and it was evident that Sheila had been outlining some line of action that had the effect of disturbing and alarming George. He sat with a troubled expression on his face, and Sheila appeared to be waiting for him to make up his mind.

"All right, I agree," he said at length. "Remember, I would not if it were anyone else, not that I distrust you for a second—I would just refuse to listen to a word. John Henry is different. I shall play my part for I like him and wish them both well; and I hope it will not prove disastrous. It is a dangerous proceeding, but I agree—on the condition mentioned."

Sheila—I am sorry to have to state it—achieved a complicated and most unlady-like grimace.

"Beast!" she said. "It is so like a man to take an unfair advantage."

George remained unmoved.

"Is it altogether an unfair advantage?" he asked.

Sheila arose and went to the door, and when she had turned the handle, she looked back and spoke.

"It would be," she said, "if—if the two beautiful creatures had not both grown impatient."

George bounded to his feet, but the door was closed and locked before he could reach it.

"Open the door, Sheila!" he pleaded. "Remember my coming ordeal!"

"I refuse," said Sheila, and then she laughed an odd little laugh. "Do you remember a small boy of twelve and a half who had a great ambition to be a second Sherlock Holmes?"

"I do," said George with a chuckle. "I remember the incident very clearly. The parson's wife and Muggie had just come in by the french-window, and that made it worse, for I said 'Oh!' and frightened them both into fits."

"Do you remember nothing else?"

"I do," continued George, still chuckling. "I remember Muggie threatening to tell your father, and then turning the house upside down for glue, putty, and a paint-brush. I remember a small girl standing on tip-toe, holding a square of wood in place while Fammy inserted putty and plied the paint-brush, and I remember wondering if it would stick in and stand the door being—oh!"

"Yes!" said Sheila, in an uncertain voice.

"Stand clear one moment," said George.

He ran his fingers over the door and struck it sharply with his clenched fist at a point almost level with the lock. A small square of wood fell out.

"You can unlock the door—afterwards," said Sheila, and a portion of her face appeared at the opening.

George succeeded in unlocking the door—afterwards. By the time he did so Sheila had disappeared for the night.

Next morning, at breakfast, George Cornwall learnt the story of the mutilation of the door for the first time.

"Boys do the most absurd things," he remarked. "Things without sense or reason."

"Muggie said it was foolish, at the time, but I believe now it was the best thing I ever did in my life," said George with conviction. "What do you think, Sheila?"

"That you have taken a very long time to find it out," said Sheila demurely.

As George said afterwards, this was not a fair answer, taking all the circumstances of the case into consideration.

George Cornwall listened to Sheila's description of John Henry, in a state of panic over the production of his play, and he seemed greatly amused but somewhat moved to pity. He agreed to the suggestion that they should help him as much as lay in their power, and he stated that this had been his intention from the first. He was considerably startled, however, when he learnt that Sheila herself was to afford the necessary help. The idea did not appeal to him at all. He objected most strongly and said that it was absurd. Eventually he gave in, overpowered by argument and the logical reasoning of George, from whom he had expected opposition to the scheme and not support.

"I believe," he said to Muggie, later on in the morning, "George and Sheila had recovered from their attack of marriage-sickness. It was nonsense—we all knew that, but they were annoyed at us for saying so. George seems to have no objection to Sheila dancing off to London to help John Henry Millman, and that speaks for itself. I like the lad, but he is not the one for Sheila."

The sole reply Muggie made to this was to snort loudly and say: "I always knew there was nothing between them but nonsense to be shattered by the first man Sheila took a fancy to."

It is extremely probable that both George Cornwall and Muggie would have been surprised if somebody had told them that their belief in the absurdity of such a marriage arose from the fact that they did not want it to take place. It is more than probable that they would have been annoyed if the accident of poor George's

birth were put forward as a reason for this; but it was the case for all that.

Sheila commenced to divide her days between her aunt's abode in Kensington and the Red House, and she helped John Henry in his theatrical entanglements. She was quite competent to do so with an experience gained by aid of her father, who had written several plays that had been produced, and a few that had even paid. In this direction her efforts were praiseworthy and greatly to be commended, but her activities did not stop there. They went on. In fact they went on to a extent that made Little David gasp with mingled horror and astonishment, and caused John Henry to become exceedingly startled at times. Veronica went through a period of excessive indignation, at first, but this disappeared suddenly and with amazing completeness. Mrs. Baldwin—she had an evil mind—had a good deal to say in the bar round the corner on the subject of Sheila. That young woman, on the occasions when she was at home, stated to young George that she had never worked so hard in all her life—with no result. This appeared to amuse young George, but it also made him vastly indignant. As for Fammy she reverted to her former statement about John Henry being in want of a pair of spectacles.

He, poor man, was greatly harassed. He alternated between moments of exaltation and hours of the profoundest gloom. This was caused by the progress of his play towards completion. There were other results which arose from the same source, such as thoughts of murder towards innocent and deserving members of the theatrical profession; occasions when he arrived home in a cab and announced to Little David that they must leave London at once and never return—he left his hat, coat, stick, and Sheila, in the theatre on one of these hurried flights; and many other weird and fantastic happenings; but, apart from all this, he was exceedingly disturbed and for no reason that he could think of or imagine. Ever since he had spent the night in the Black Bull at Tipping Horley, John Henry had been ashamed of himself

at odd moments. Now he was more than ashamed. He was thoroughly disgusted.

Meditating of an evening in the company of Veronica and Little David, the strangest thoughts would come to him, suddenly, for no obvious reason. Once or twice he had been impelled to leave the house and go for a hasty tramp through the streets to rid himself of these disturbing fancies. The behaviour of Sheila, too, puzzled and distracted him. He liked the girl, admired her immensely, and was very grateful for her real and much-needed help; but she succeeded in making him exceedingly uncomfortable. He had thought her the essence of spontaneous gaiety and simplicity, leavened by a plentiful supply of sound common-sense, governed by a warm and generous heart. Now he did not know quite what to think. Her manner towards him was peculiar. It alternated between an embarrassing friendliness, and an equally disconcerting reserve.

Often he caught her looking at him in the strangest of fashions; as if something preyed on her mind. She sighed a great deal, and when they were out together she kept so close to him that it was difficult to walk straight. More than once, in the theatre, he had turned round to find her standing behind him in a humble attitude; and on these occasions her face seemed to be full of a mute reproach. When he addressed a remark directly to her she appeared to waken to a state of great pleasure. When he spoke to other people she relapsed once more into an apathetic and mournful condition. The only occasions on which she came to life as the Sheila John Henry had known and admired was when anything went wrong with the progress of the play. Then Sheila was normal and quite decided in her views and opinions. Her very voice was different.

John Henry determined to speak to George on this subject on the very first opportunity. He was the more determined to do so since he had hinted to Sheila that she seemed ill, and her acceptance of this remark had driven him to the conclusion that she

was. This had happened in her aunt's drawing-room in Kensington, and Sheila had immediately walked to the window, stood for a time with her back turned on John Henry, and trembled violently. She had also spoken.

"Please leave me alone," she had said, in a voice quivering with suppressed emotion.

John Henry, thoroughly scared, had done so without delay. All these things, as you might readily understand, gave John Henry much food for thought. When he was not thinking about them his attention rested on Little David. He, also, added to his troubles, for the boy seemed to be ailing. He said that he was quite well, but this was contradicted by his looks. His cheeks had grown pale and he was obviously thinner. He had periods of great depression. He went earlier to bed and he spent a great part of the day in his room. He was very silent of an evening, and the happiness of their first weeks together seemed to have faded from his face. His appearance moved John Henry to a profound compassion. He seemed so forlorn and disconsolate. There were times, however, when he was neither. On these occasions he was quite unmistakably indignant and even warlike.

John Henry had once asked if there was any reason for all this—any reason that he could dispel. He did so in a gentle voice, for the inquiry came straight from his heart; and he never did it again.

Little David made no response but he rose and hurriedly left the room. He was not seen again that night and Veronica did not put in an appearance till it was almost time to go to bed. Then she did, but only for a second. She spoke in that second, however, and her words astounded John Henry. The tone of her voice, too, amazed him, for Veronica seemed annoyed.

"Don't you ever go and do it again," she said, and then vanished.

John Henry spent an unsettled night wondering just what he had done.

Sheila, arriving the next afternoon for tea, was side-tracked by Veronica half-way down stairs. There they held a whispered conversation. Veronica explained the episode of the previous night, at length, and with her own comments thereon.

"No good arguing with Little David," said Veronica in conclusion, "for his mind is made up to remain. There is only one person who can alter that and he would do so at once—if he found out. Little David refuses to help matters, and says it would be wicked if we interfered. It is hard, however, and I am sorry for the poor little soul. What he thinks about you would not look well on paper."

"That does not matter," said Sheila, "for it will all come right in the end. Mabel Canning has no business to go on in this obstinate fashion—not that I blame her, for I might do the same myself. Little David has to suffer something for the privilege of being thought a boy. Don't you worry, Veronica. I shall have a brain wave and act on it whenever this theatrical business is in good trim."

"The sooner the better," said Veronica, "for I cannot bear to see the poor soul grow thinner and paler day by day."

Sheila left her at that, and mounting the stairs, entered John Henry's room; and there she found Mabel Canning, for Little David sat hunched up on a chair in an attitude of profound depression. Mabel Canning vanished at once, however, and it was Little David who arose and regarded her with a mute and reproachful stare.

"John Henry will be in presently," he said. "He has gone out to post a letter to George."

"To whom?" asked Sheila startled.

"To George," repeated Little David. "He thinks you are ill, and is very worried about it."

Sheila grew red and fought with a strong inclination to laugh. Little David remained mute. The two friends regarded each

other; the one with attention and some uneasiness, the other with a strong and growing indignation.

"Sheila! How can you? After all I said that night in your own room!" said Little David in a voice of reproach.

Sheila was silent, for a moment, and then she spoke in a suppressed and quivering voice which sounded as if it arose from deep emotion. It did, and the emotion was of a mixed nature, being partly compounded of pity, amusement, and pain.

"There are some things we cannot control," she said.

At that moment John Henry Millman walked into the room.

Sheila was destined, as it happened, to find out the truth of her statement in a very short time.

CHAPTER XVI

THE CONSTERNATION OF JOHN HENRY MILLMAN

You may have forgotten about the sick boy who travelled down to Tipping Horley on the day when John Henry arrived at the Red House, and so, for a time, had John Henry himself. He remembered, one morning, as he was returning from the theatre where his play had reached the point of a fixed date for the dress rehearsal, and the memory caused him to groan with annoyance. He was on a bus, at the time, having engaged in personal combat with several other gentlemen for the privilege of travelling thereon—he was late and had determined to be home early, for Little David seemed specially sad that morning; but this did not deter him from immediately casting himself into the street at the imminent risk of his life.

The bus conductor—a young and talkative creature—was moved to comment on this to the rest of the bus.

“Something has bitten that one—badly,” he remarked in a genial voice. “Let us hope it is not his wife!”

The rest of the bus—they were a load of decent and self-respecting English people—preserved a stony silence.

John Henry was badly bitten, at least he felt very sore over his omission, and exceedingly anxious to rectify the same. He searched for and found a telephone box, and from there he sought speech with the Red House. He knew that Sheila was at home, and he wished her to do him a favour.

That young woman, as it happened, was seated with her elbows on the table and her head on her hands attempting to fathom just what she must do in the matter of John Henry and Little

David. A letter lay beside her—the letter George had received from John Henry—in which comment was made on the state of her health, on her own affection for young George, on young George's affection for her, and on John Henry's desire to see them both well and happy, and settled in an enjoyment of the good things that are in life—when one can find them. It was a very nice, a very touching, and an exceedingly genuine document. It had moved young George to a very little laughter and a very great compassion. Sheila was alone. George, in fact, had been dismissed because he was unable to give any advice, and only able to say what Sheila herself felt—that she had failed signally in her efforts either to force Mabel Canning to proclaim her sex, or to arouse John Henry to the fact that he was in love with her or any other female creature in creation. This was a somewhat sore point with Sheila. She felt there was something wrong, but she was not angry with John Henry. That was an absurd thought. She was angry, however, so it had to be with George. Little David was too far distant at the moment to be useful in this capacity.

She had reached the point of determining to hunt out George—he had retired wrapped in a mantle of offended dignity—and remind him that he was the originator of the entire situation, a process which would very easily blossom into a general discharge of her feelings at his head, when the telephone bell rang. It was a distraction, and she welcomed it gladly.

The sound of John Henry's voice, speaking at the other end of the wire, shook her composure a trifle; and the text of his speech increased her discomfiture. John Henry, speaking in the urgent, pleading voice of one who has committed a wrong that must be immediately repaired, begged her to go over to Tipping Horley, have speech with the ancient porter, and find out how the sick boy fared. He, John Henry, had entirely forgotten his existence. It was a terrible thought, for the poor little fellow might be dead.

Sheila was shattered.

There was some reason for this, considering that Muggie—kindly soul—had made several pilgrimages to the cottage on the other side of Tipping Horley; carried messages and other odd trifles such as money and dainty food to that humble abode; and returned heavily burdened on each occasion with words of gratitude and quaint little speeches, some of which were intended for the ears of John Henry. These had been committed to Sheila, and lost by her in the interest aroused by her own exciting occupation. Not one of them had reached the ears of John Henry. Not even the fact that Fammy and the odd man—when they came to hear of it—had also found the cottage. It was impossible to say all this over the telephone and on the spur of the moment.

The matter was complicated by the fact that the sick boy—without having actively expressed such a thing—had evinced a keen desire to see John Henry in person. This had been confided to Sheila. The sick boy was better now, having been persuaded into a desire for life through various acts of kindness and the absence of the fear that his poor wasted life was burdening his people with a too heavy drain on their feeble means, but he was far from recovered. Muggie had been of the opinion, for some time past, that John Henry would be able to give him an added encouragement to live. This also Sheila had heard of late. Quite recently, it is true, but still some days back.

It was an appalling situation to combat in a moment.

“You had better come down here at once and go over yourself,” gasped the poor girl in great distress. “What can I do? You would be a thousand times better, and then he wanted to see you. I—I have heard so!”

In a case like this John Henry’s decisions were invariably sure and certain. His voice replied applaudingly the idea. He stated that, by running on some other unknown but rapid means of locomotion, he would just manage to catch the through train. He would be in Tipping Horley that afternoon.

“I shall meet you with the car,” said the conscience-stricken

Sheila, but this was lost on John Henry. He had gone. It was a moment before Sheila grasped this fact, for he had omitted to replace the receiver on the hook. Sheila wondered what the telephone people thought. Judging by sundry conversations with these people, she came to the conclusion that their thoughts would be tinged with blood. They were.

Sheila went through a period of acute remorse and then she confided the entire matter to young George. This eased her mind so that, when he made a simple remark, her intelligence jumped to the possibilities of the situation. Sheila became excited.

"John Henry seems to be fated to deal with boys in distress," remarked George.

Sheila sprang to her feet, and her face glowed with animation.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "My plan will succeed. You see if it does not. My word! It is a blessing in disguise!"

Her opinion became somewhat mitigated on this point in the course of time.

John Henry arrived at Tipping Horley and was pleasantly surprised to find Sheila waiting for him with the car. He greeted the ancient porter with warmth and was exceedingly satisfied to learn that the boy's condition was vastly improved. He was filled with gratitude at the news of Muggie's pilgrimages and Fammy's generosity through the medium of the odd man, and exceedingly annoyed with the odd man for stating that he himself was the prime mover of the entire matter. That, as John Henry remarked, considering the fashion in which he had callously behaved from the day when he had seen the boy, was utter nonsense. His conduct had been the height of selfishness.

"I have been very wicked," said Sheila penitently, as they drove along the country roads. "I have been given many messages for you, and forgotten to deliver them. I have no excuse except that—that I have been greatly distracted of late."

"I know," said John Henry. "I have seen it myself and it has

worried me. We need say no more. You have some excuse for your forgetfulness. I have none."

He spoke with such assurance that Sheila was almost led to believe it true. She did, for a moment, and then she felt ashamed, and hung her head in distress.

John Henry, perceiving this, grew exceedingly thoughtful.

The sick boy was delighted. He was more than delighted. He was so pleased that they had to be careful of not exciting him too much. He lay and smiled, and the smile sat so oddly on his wasted face, that, taken in conjunction with a flush of pleasure, it proved too much for Sheila's conscience. She went out into the back garden and frankly blubbered to the immense disappointment of a collection of ducks, hens, and turkeys, that had looked hopefully on her in the light of food. The turkeys, in especially, were marvellously indignant. It is amusing to think that this outburst, which was absolutely genuine, relieved her feelings so that she could think hopefully on the success of her plan in the matter of Little David. Sheila was a good-hearted and very feminine girl.

John Henry sat and talked with the sick boy—at least he sat when he could, but he was constantly rising to look out of the window. The reason he gave for this was because he feared the car might disappear. Whether he thought that the disreputable vehicle would suddenly move away of its own accord, or whether he imagined that the cat of the establishment who sat staring at it in a species of rapture—few cars ever stopped at that door—was likely to start the engine and go off on a world tour, did not transpire. He made no other explanation, but as he rubbed his eyes very hard on each occasion of looking out—to make doubly sure of his vision no doubt—there can be no question of the reality of the danger. No one did question it.

The time came soon—very soon, when they must leave the boy for fear of exhausting him too much. He seemed quite willing for them to go, indeed he expressed a fear that he had detained them too long; but, first of all, he asked to be allowed to speak to

John Henry for a few seconds by himself. This, as you may imagine, was readily granted—from the window, by the way, where John Henry had gone to look at the troublesome car. It was rather an ordeal for poor John Henry. He had a vague notion of what the boy might be about to say, but he was not prepared for what he did say.

“You must not be offended,” he commenced. “I lie here and think when I cannot sleep. I have wanted to know so much, and uncle has told me about her. Tell me, is the young lady your sister?”

John Henry was astounded and very far indeed from suspecting that the boy was talking about Little David, whom, you will remember, the ancient porter had seen in great distress on two—on three for that matter, I had forgotten about the morning when Veronica accompanied him up to London—occasions.

“Certainly not!” said John Henry. “She is my friend.”

“I am glad,” said the sick boy, and he turned to John Henry with a smile that was beautiful, “because now I can lie and hope that she loves you as I might do. You have no necessity to tell me that you love her, you who have compassion on everything that is helpless.”

John Henry was completely shattered by this remark. He was so much shattered that he never quite knew how he got out of the house and into the car. He must have done so, however, for the next thing he was distinctly conscious of was that they were going along the road very slowly, and Sheila was talking to him. Sheila—he had never thought of her in that light—looked helpless. She felt helpless, too, for she was a nice girl and she liked John Henry; but her mind was made up, so she went on. The task was a difficult one, but the memory of her former failures remained and rankled. Sheila was a woman, and a pretty one at that, and she was ignorant, unfortunately, of the sick boy's words. She was determined, also, to finish off this

matter of Little David once and for all, and force that young gentleman to betray himself sufficiently to awaken John Henry's suspicions.

"You are very kind and considerate to other people," she said slowly, "but not to everyone."

John Henry jumped and gave every indication of a desire to flee.

This was unfortunate, for Sheila commenced to enjoy herself. She sighed.

"You were very kind to the sick boy," she continued, "but you did not think of what I was doing."

"What were you doing?" asked John Henry breathlessly.

"Crying in the back garden," said Sheila, and then she grew ashamed and stirred the car into rapid motion.

They flew along the road in silence, John Henry with his mind in a state of chaos, and Sheila with her mind in a condition divided between mirth and compunction. At the Red House John Henry stumbled out of the car and stood on the doorstep with a wild eye like a man who lost and does not believe that he is still on the earth. Sheila's compunction increased and overruled her mirth.

"Do not think of what I have said," she exclaimed. "You know I am always talking nonsense."

Her voice was sincere and carried conviction. The conviction it carried to John Henry was one that frightened him exceedingly, but the sincerity seemed to him absolute. She did not wish him to worry . . .! The chaos of his mind disappeared. He no longer appeared to be afraid. He saw reason in Sheila's attitude towards himself for the past weeks. He saw this by the light of her words taken in conjunction with the words of the sick boy; yet his own instinct jibbed at the conclusion. He thought of it all in a flash while Sheila stood by the car wondering what was working in his mind. She wondered still more when he entered the house, without saying a word, and with the assurance

of one who knows just what he must do. Sheila, in truth, grew alarmed so that she delayed her own entry as long as possible.

The matter was assuming a serious aspect in her own mind, and that was disturbing.

John Henry walked straight into the sitting-room and there he found the person he sought—young George. He walked straight up to him—there was no one else in the room, but that would have made no difference so far as John Henry was concerned—placed both hands on his shoulders, and looked down into his face.

“You love Sheila and she loves you?” he said, in the voice of one stating a fact which requires to be confirmed.

George took great credit for maintaining the part assigned him under adverse circumstances—he got none, but that does not matter. As he said himself, it was only the customary reward of the righteous. He assumed a grave air that arose, in truth, from his own sincere desire.

“We were boy and girl friends, lovers perhaps, but now that I am a man I wish to place her happiness first of all.”

John Henry asked a second question.

“Did Sheila speak to you before she commenced to help me with my play?”

George felt that he could answer this with assurance.

“She did,” he said. “We understand each other. Anything that she has done has been with my knowledge and approval. I am quite contented and happy.”

“Thank you,” said John Henry quietly.

He removed his hands from young George’s shoulders, walked out of the room, out of the house, and round to the shed where the car lived. There he found Sheila, rather red in the face, and looking decidedly scared. She gasped when John Henry appeared before her, and her cheeks grew pale. His air of determination was sufficient to startle her.

“Sheila!” he said quietly. “There is something I have wanted

to tell you for a long time but my lips were sealed. I thought your wishes lay in a different direction. I feel that I can speak now. I would like to marry you. I shall do so—if it is your wish—whenever you please. You will make me very happy. It had not occurred to me that any woman might care for me in that light. I am very grateful.”

Having said this John Henry bowed in an odd but rather engaging fashion, smiled in a very winning and touching fashion, removed his hat, and walked away. He walked past the house, out into the road, and encountering a heavy motor-lorry slowly insinuating itself round a sharp corner, swung himself up behind. He did this in the most natural fashion as if it were a habit of his, and his condition was that of the small boys at the back of a delivery-van, in place of a man brimming over with consternation and many other emotions as well. He did not pause to consider that the lorry was rapidly taking him to some unknown destination. He did not think of it at all. He just acted—in obedience to a primeval instinct of flight. His mind was otherwise occupied. There were, in truth, quite a number of things to occupy it. The lorry was a covered one with an open back hung with curtains of tarpaulin. It was half-filled with packing cases and small barrels. He chose a barrel, seated himself with composure, leant his head against a packing case, and commenced to think. It proved a harrowing occupation.

A long time elapsed while the lorry bumped and rattled along the country roads, just as John Henry's thoughts bumped and jangled in his head. Then the lorry stopped before an inn, and the driver went inside for a drink. He remained there—after the fashion of men who go in for one drink—and had two, and then a third just to make the number odd—he was fond of odd numbers after an experience in France during the war. It was necessary, too, to explain all this to the young woman behind the bar. It would not have been necessary if she had not been pretty. She was pretty.

This was fortunate, for just as the driver of the lorry reached the exciting—it really was exciting when told after many repetitions—part of his tale, John Henry reached a comparative state of calm, and uttered a remark.

“What is the good of being alive if you cannot bring happiness to at least one person?” he remarked. “I have nothing to worry about and a great deal, a very great deal, to be astonished and grateful for.”

He looked round composedly on his surroundings and experienced a slight shock of astonishment. He parted the tarpaulin curtains, looked out, and his astonishment increased. He climbed down, studied the lorry with attention, and took a mental note of the number.

“LX 4457! I must have climbed in there at some time,” said John Henry profoundly, and he passed down the road. It might—according to his voice and manner—have been at some long past date—say several years previously.

He gained the main street of a small town and walked on, turned to the left and still walked on. A woman, meeting him, paused, and recognising in him a stranger, asked if he knew where he was going. After a moment of reflection it occurred to John Henry that he did not.

“When I come to think of it—no,” said John Henry.

The woman looked at him strangely.

“I thought not,” she said, “seeing you are a stranger here. This road goes nowhere but to the church, and although some of the tombs are interesting it will soon be too dark to see the stones, lay aside read the inscriptions.”

John Henry shivered but he answered at once.

“I believe,” he said, “that is where I must go sooner or later—to church I mean,” he explained, as the woman retreated a pace, “but I have no wish to see this one. Perhaps you can direct me to the station. I have only just arrived here and wish to leave the place at once.”

The woman led him there. This was kind, but he was a perfect God-send to her. She is still talking about the odd man who looked sane but made such curious statements, and the amazing fact that he had not the slightest idea of where he was, what the name of the village was, what he was doing there, or why he had come. One point about him saddened her greatly. He knew where he was going—London, and the train came in almost at once. She will continue to talk about him for the rest of her life. John Henry had supplied her with something invaluable. All her life she had been talking, and now, at length, she had found a subject that interested other people. There was one drawback however. She was a lady, and her digestion was doomed to be irretrievably ruined. No dinner-party in the village was considered complete without her once the story had gained weight. It was so interesting to hear the fresh additions!

In the train a sudden thought came to John Henry and caused him to groan, thereby disturbing the peace of mind of an elderly gentleman, and a lady with a child; not to speak of the young woman who sat opposite and who imagined that he had been staring at her with interest. He had remembered that Little David would be anxiously awaiting his return, and he would not be back till close on midnight. This brought a second and more distressing idea to life.

What was Little David to do now?

John Henry buried his face in his hands and groaned for the second time, and the young woman left the carriage at the next station with a toss of her head and a muttered remark about lunatics being prevented from travelling in trains. The lady with the child was due to get out at the next station but one, and she was not sorry. As for the old gentleman he sat out the entire journey, but he kept his eyes fixed on John Henry, and his hand uplifted to grasp the communication cord. It did not prove necessary, however, to stop the train.

About the same time, in the Red House, Sheila was finding

out the truth of her statement to Little David that there were some things over which one has no control. John Henry had assumed the proportion of one of these things. Young George suffered in consequence. This was illogical but strictly feminine. The two young people had departed in the car to catch John Henry at the station on his way back to Town. He was not there. He had not been seen there. He had not been seen anywhere. He was not seen anywhere. He appeared to have vanished into thin air.

They found this hard to believe—as people do find what they fail to understand hard to grasp. They waited, and watched, and searched—all with no result. Then George suggested the advisability of his going up to London, but the last train had gone. He then made the suggestion that a telegram should be sent to John Henry, and he was half killed for having made it since the post office was now shut for the night.

The evening passed in an unwonted silence that made George Cornwall and Muggie grow alarmed and suspicious. The two young people increased this impression for they started at every step outside the door. The older members of the Cornwall family went to bed, and neither of them would have been astonished if some dire catastrophe had occurred in the night. They would even have been filled with a sensation of relief that the suspense was past and over. They were certain that Sheila had been doing something startling and out of the common, and on consideration, perhaps she had. They went to bed earlier than was their usual custom, for they had no wish to hear anything. That, they thought, might be worse than knowing nothing. Perhaps it was.

“George! I feel a beast—a perfect beast!” said Sheila, when they were assured that their elders were settled for the night. “I wish I had not started this wretched business! If you had seen the way he looked at me. It was heart-rending! Why did you act so well?”

George groaned.

"I did my best," he said, "and small thanks I get for it. He looked at me also, put himself as you might say into my hands. It was not pleasant for me."

"Don't you be a beast too," said Sheila. "One beast is enough in this house," and she burst into tears.

George comforted her to the best of his ability. He did very well, for a time, and then he made a foolish slip.

"After all," he said, "this is just what you wanted, so it is not so bad as you think."

It was a fatal remark and he suffered for it. The fatal part about it was that it happened to be true; only, as Sheila explained, it was a case of perverted truth because her plan had not been calculated to cause this disturbance. George may have been foolish in some respects but he had moments of wisdom. He refrained from asking what her plan had been.

"We must send him a telegram in the morning," he said. "We can concoct it now and have it in readiness."

This wise thought cleared the air. Sheila grew composed and argued fiercely over the wording of that telegram. It assumed many shapes, and forms, and sizes, but at length it read: "Sheila and George very sorry. They want to be forgiven immediately. Please return or let us come to you."

They both grew more cheerful when this result was reached.

"I shall go out and send it off before breakfast," George announced at the foot of the stairs.

"I should not do that," said Sheila. "We have had so much trouble, we might as well wait and learn what happens to Little David. He is bound to speak. My plan may succeed after all."

George remained silent. He was profiting by experience. He would, it is presumed, make, in time, an excellent husband. Perhaps this was the reason why Sheila, suddenly and for no obvious cause, kissed him at the top of the stairs. George—his wisdom on this particular evening was almost supernatural—was pleased, but with a reservation. He wanted to know if Sheila had been

struck with another idea. As it happened she had, but the idea was not one to which he would have had any objection.

It was: "What a lucky girl I am with dear old George!"

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID FLEES PRECIPITATELY

PHILIP CANNING had been accustomed, all his life, to receive an abnormal amount of consideration and attention from the people with whom he came in contact. His wealth, position, and the favours that he could bestow made this natural. On the arrival of the period when, for the first time in his existence, he really was worthy of a little attention, no one seemed to consider him at all. It was very amusing and quite natural. The people who fawned on him for what they could get, or appreciated the efforts of his cook and the soundness of his wines, remained the same—naturally. There was no reason why they should alter. The man had not gone bankrupt! Since he purposely avoided them from the time of Mabel's disappearance, they did not count; and the people whom he now sought to approach, far from being gratified thereby, appeared to be filled with resentment at the sight of his face.

They were all travellers encountered on that stony road on which his feet were set—the road to his own heart. It is not to be wondered at that they looked on him askance. What had he in common with them, this man who had spent his life wrapped in the dignity of his name, fame, wealth; active in pursuit of money, decently blinded to anything but what he desired to see, and keenly interested in his engineering devices! Nothing! Less than nothing, for they were all in search of one thing—happiness, and they all knew the story of Little David.

When he approached them Philip Canning was in search of both, but he was not aware of the fact at the time. An iceberg

does not melt in a day even under the rays of the hottest of suns, and an iceberg is unprotected. Philip Canning was not an iceberg, and he was protected. He was protected by a number of things of which wealth, comfort, pride, indignation, and his own immense and wonderful dignity were a few. He was very unfortunate, poor man, and he was quite unaware of the fact.

When, driven to desperation by the continued failure of the police to find even a clue of where Mabel might be, he had approached his two partners as a man, and a more or less humble one at that, he had done so with the thought in his mind that they were his paid servants. Silence was necessary for them. It was not a good spirit in which to seek help, and he had returned from that interview rather the worse for it than otherwise.

The suggestion of Sinclair Dodds, on the advisability of placing the matter before John Henry Millman, maddened him when he considered it in the quiet of his study. To think that he should place the intimate affairs of his home life before an unknown author, a thing lifted out of the gutter with an array of pawn-tickets in his hat, lifted to be kept up till it was sucked dry—supposing it went dry suddenly, or placed in an elevated spot dignified and surrounded by the glory of Canning and Canning—supposing the sucking proved protracted! It was absurd! It was more than absurd. It was not decent! Philip Canning disliked all indecency. He simmered over the thought, but he was a man of habit.

He had acquired a fresh habit, one added to the daily routine of his life since the disappearance of Mabel. He was wont to sit, when the house was still and there was no chance of disturbance, with the box of cigarettes at his elbow and the letter from Fammy in his hand. On these occasions he travelled far down his stony road, but it was only in thought. He had done so on the evening after the interview with his two partners, and his views were somewhat modified thereby.

He made no effort to approach John Henry Millman, but the

next day he went to see Fammy. She opened the door herself. As he was wondering how to start a conversation, Fammy gave him a little assistance. She shut the door in his face. She did not bang it shut, but closed it gently and firmly.

The idea which came to Philip Canning was that the woman must be ill. There could be no other explanation. He knocked a second time. There was an interval, the sound of whispering, and then the door opened. A tall, thin, melancholy-looking man appeared. He did not look at Philip Canning, but his two eyes gazed intently on two widely divergent points, one on either side of his head. Philip Canning was startled at this apparition. The man spoke and his words were calculated to startle him still more.

"People who come to the wrong door usually go away when they find out their mistake," said the apparition, and then the door was closed and locked.

It was several moments before Philip Canning was able to walk away from that closed door, and when he did this, his thoughts were chaotic. The senior partner of Canning and Canning insulted by a serving-woman, and a man with a cast in his eye! Two people not worth more than a few pounds apiece! Incredible! An insult brought to him by his own—it was hours, in the stillness of the night to be exact, before he could add the word daughter.

He did not again approach Fammy's door, but he was assured that she knew where Mabel was. He made no attempt to approach any door for a long time. Then one day he met George Cornwall in Town and they talked. To give him his due, he attempted to broach the subject of Mabel, to ask if George Cornwall had, by some wild chance, any knowledge of her whereabouts; but he could not. Pride kept his lips sealed. He was distant, polite, and exceedingly interested in the progress of John Henry's play. That was all.

The two men stood on the platform at Paddington station,

both waiting for the same train. It came in, and George Cornwall made a remark with obvious relief.

"I invariably travel third," he said. "Good-day!"

Philip Canning watched him go in silence.

All this time he was spending money like water, employing police, private detectives, and other humourous people who came and went in all manner of pleasing disguises—with no result. Mabel had been absent now—for the sake of her health—for several weeks. Philip Canning was prevented from going out amongst his friends by a sudden pressure of important business. The business, as a matter of fact, commenced to be neglected. There were days when he did not think of it at all, but all his efforts were made in secret, and with a view to concealment. He suffered, but he suffered through the medium of his damaged dignity, not from the pain of a damaged heart. That organ was in a state of discomfort, oppressed as you might say, and the oppression grew worse day by day; but if Mabel had unexpectedly walked in, he would merely have experienced an immense relief and immediately sent her to some secure and far distant spot. He was alive, scarcely what might be called sentient, yet he was waking up slowly.

He never doubted Mabel's guilt. This was a point in his favour. He held a theory, based on the shadow seen on the blind, that the girl was living concealed with a lover. There were moments when he imagined horrible things, but they were few. He was a man of reason. If the girl had no place to go to, she would not have left her home for no reason other than his own natural indignation! Of an evening when he sat down and meditated, he could see clearly how all this might have been averted by an interest on his part in her life, and he regretted the omission bitterly; but in the day-time, conscious of the regard of his household, smarting under the memory of the slights he had received from Fammy and other people of no account, the fires of resentment burned with a steady violence.

Then one day he slipped on a piece of orange peel in Charing Cross Road, caught the arm of a passer-by to steady himself, and held a long conversation with a policeman. That altered the entire aspect of the case. This may sound absurd, but it is the simple truth. The passer-by happened to be the Dainty Brute, and he had no knowledge of the orange peel. He had a knowledge of Philip Canning, however, and when that gentleman clutched his arm, he imagined that the action was one of attack. He fled. Philip Canning was discomfited. To his mind it appeared that even strangers were commencing to shrink from him.

A young, fresh-faced policeman, who had been watching the incident, came up and saluted. He knew Philip Canning by sight, and he was of the opinion that Philip Canning knew the Dainty Brute. He was curious to learn how this came about, so he determined to probe into the matter. To run the Dainty Brute to earth would be a feather in his cap. He had an added interest in the man, too, engendered by John Henry Millman and Little David.

"If you have any reason for wishing to detain that bird, sir," he said, "just tell me. We know him well and are waiting for a chance to trip him up."

Philip Canning was astonished but relieved. The man had fled through a sense of fear.

"I slipped," he said. "The action was purely instinctive."

The constable laughed.

"Oh!" he said. "I hoped that you might be an indignant father."

Philip Canning, being after a fashion an indignant father, was curious. He asked the man to explain. In the succeeding moments he learnt enough about the supposed activities of the Dainty Brute in the direction of snaring, ruining, and utilising young girls for his own profit, to make him go sick of a sudden and cling to a lamp-post for support. He had been going to the office of Canning and Canning, but he went home instead—to

think. He was a man blessed with much common-sense and little imagination. The result of his thoughts made him summon the housekeeper.

She came, and was shocked and astonished at the change in his appearance and expression. He told her that all efforts to trace Mabel had proved fruitless, that he had imagined her to be with—he halted over this—the owner of the hat, but the point remained uncertain. He said that it had not occurred to him that she might be in serious trouble or danger. He explained that he had wished to keep the matter secret because of the disgrace to his name. Then he asked what she thought.

She looked at him in silence for a few moments, with a stunned, horrified face, and then her eye-lids hid her eyes.

"I am your servant, sir. I cannot think," she said.

"Speak, woman!" he said roughly. "I command—no, beg you to do so."

She spoke. She told him what she thought, and she had been thinking quite a lot of late. Her remarks do not require to be stated. The last few words were sufficiently illuminating to make all that went before unnecessary.

"I do not like to think now," she said. "I can only hope that the poor child is dead."

After that she left Philip Canning alone. It was the kindest thing to do.

He reached the end of his stony road a short time before the dawn.

Next morning he called on Fammy almost as soon as that kindly soul had arisen from bed. She did not again shut the door in his face, but she regarded him with great disfavour.

"I have discovered that my child has never had a father," he said quietly, "and I must ask her if she wants one now. She is lost. Will you listen to my story and help me find her. You are her foster mother and you seem happy. You would be distressed as I am now, if you had no idea of where she is!"

Fammy's face softened a trifle, but she shook her head.

"You have taken too long to make the discovery for me to help you," she said, "but I can send you to one that might," and she gave him John Henry Millman's name and address.

This, to say the least of it, astounded Philip Canning; but he went. He arrived on the door-step of John Henry's abode on the afternoon when that gentleman was careering towards the sick boy in the car with Sheila Cornwall. He rang the bell. After an interval he again did so. After a still longer interval he commenced to ring the bell continuously for moments on end. Veronica, as it happened, was busy washing the first-floor landing.

Mrs. Baldwin answered the door in person.

This, as a start, was disconcerting to Philip Canning, for Mrs. Baldwin's appearance was decidedly against her. Her face was too reminiscent of a piece of raw meat gone bad to be strictly pleasant if she happened to be annoyed. On the present occasion she was exceedingly annoyed.

"Well!" she demanded aggressively.

"Might I see Mr. Millman?" asked Philip Canning, retreating a step.

Mrs. Baldwin, not deigning to reply, beckoned him to follow her, indicated a door, and plunged down the back stairs. Philip Canning, greatly discomfited, entirely out of his element in the dingy surroundings, knocked at the door in a diffident fashion.

"May I come in?" he asked.

He imagined that he heard a startled gasp, a sudden movement as of one in precipitate flight, but of this he was uncertain. The house of Mrs. Baldwin abounded in strange noises to anyone foolish enough to linger in the passages. He opened the door and looked in. The room appeared to be empty. There were signs as if someone had been seated by the fire, but no one seemed to be there.

"Mr. Millman," he said, raising his voice, "are you in? It is Mr. Canning speaking!"

A sound of scrubbing overhead ceased, and a face appeared and gazed down over the banisters.

"What do you want?" asked Veronica.

Philip Canning advanced to the foot of the stairs and looked up. He opened his mouth to speak but a change in the expression of the sallow face caused him to pause in wonderment. The face had suddenly become alarmed.

Veronica came rapidly down the stairs, passed him, went to John Henry's room, and peered in. Then she went to the adjoining door, opened it, and peered in there also. Finally she closed the door of John Henry's room and walked back, but she remained between Philip Canning and these two doors, and she squared her elbows in a particularly aggressive fashion.

"What do you want?" she repeated.

"I called to see Mr. Millman. Is he at home?"

"No," said Veronica, "but if you tell me what you want to see him for, then he might be at some future time. Otherwise he will not. I answer all the bells in this house."

Philip Canning gasped.

"I cannot do that," he said. "Please tell me when he is likely to return. I wish to see him as soon as possible. It is very urgent."

Veronica took no heed of the question.

"You would not like to see anyone else," she said. "His little brother, for example?"

This was more than Philip Canning, even in his distressed and altered state, could stand.

"Certainly not," he said sharply. "Please answer my question. You are paid, I imagine, to be civil to people."

"He has gone to the theatre," said Veronica, "and may not be back for hours. You had best go home and write to him. He is very seldom here."

Philip Canning, thoroughly annoyed, stalked out of the house with dignity. Veronica followed him to the door, and watched

his receding figure till it had disappeared from sight; then she returned to John Henry's room, looked all round, went behind the screen, but there appeared to be no one about. She examined the adjoining room with a like result. She came back into John Henry's room, stood in the middle of the floor, and spoke in a voice of vexation.

"The boy has disappeared. Wherever can he have gone? Mr. John will be furious if he does not return."

A scared voice came from the direction of the screen.

"Has he gone, Veronica?"

"He has," said Veronica, "but where on earth are you?"

"Under the bed," said the voice. "That was my father. What did he want? Is he coming back? Does he know that I am here?"

"He does not," said Veronica, "and I do not think he will return. As for what he wanted that will be a business matter. It could be nothing else. I knew he was your father, for you are a little like him when you are angry. You had better come out from under the bed, Little David. What would Mr. John think if he found you there?"

"I—I cannot," gasped the voice. "At least I must, but I cannot face him just now."

Veronica was aroused to a sense of curiosity.

"Is the boy mad?" she asked in wonderment. "Does he think that he can spend the rest of his life under a bed?"

"Don't you understand," came the voice, in a sudden, agonized outburst. "Little David has fled for the time being, scared away by—by everything. I was thinking, and then, quite suddenly, I heard him speak."

There was a hideous clatter, a shrill, furious voice screeching with annoyance, and then the sound of many waters flowing and dripping to some unknown destination.

Veronica sighed in a resigned and philosophical fashion.

"That is the first-floor front," she said. "I left the bucket

outside her door. She has just fallen over it. My! What a mess for me to clean up!" She went to the door, and there she paused, struck, it appeared, with a sudden inspiration. "I believe you are right," she said with animation. "If Little David has fled, you must keep out of the way till he returns. I don't want to see you myself. It would not be fair. I'm going to mop up the water and listen to the first-floor front talking pleasant-like. She will have to wash her feet after this and that will be bound to distress her."

After the door had closed, a sorry figure, hiding in the clothes of Little David, appeared from behind the screen and crept into the adjoining room. John Henry had thought that Little David seemed exceptionally sad and pensive that morning. He had been. He had spent the entire forenoon seated before the fire in a deep meditation, and the result of his thoughts had increased his sadness. He had failed to fathom any means by which he could alter the peculiarity of his present position without disclosing that which he was more than unwilling to do. To make a bald statement of the facts of his case, or to allow any other person to do so, or even to permit of a hinting at this, was repugnant and distasteful to his sensibilities. After that, he felt, it would be quite impossible to face John Henry. Not to be able to face John Henry would entail never seeing him again. That, Little David was assured, would be a catastrophe too fearful to even think of. Now it appeared to have arrived—for a time at least.

The peculiar part of the business lay in the fact that if John Henry found out about the existence of Mabel Canning with no aid but his own, and approved of it, then the entire aspect of the case would be altered. Little David would then—with sundry fears, and blushings, and tremblings—be quite competent to face John Henry, and to continue facing him for a time that was indefinite. This indefinite time had occupied the mind of Little David during the earlier part of the afternoon, and the thought

of it was not displeasing. In the midst of this meditation had come the voice of Philip Canning at the door, and Little David had fled precipitately and completely. The sorry figure, hiding in his clothes, sat on the edge of the bed and continued to think.

It was an odd sight—that cowering, shrinking figure. It was not Little David, of that there can be no doubt. It also did not appear to be Mabel Canning. Perhaps it was something mid-way between the two. In any case it was not happy. It suffered, and shook, and seemed infinitely lost, and forlorn, and pathetic.

At supper-time the hand and arm of Veronica appeared round the door, and the hand of Veronica deposited a tray on the floor. The voice of Veronica uttered a few remarks about the advisability of eating, locking the door, and sleeping. The voice also made a further statement that need not be repeated but impelled the shrinking figure to jump up and catch hold of the hand that still grasped the tray. When this happened the hand freed itself, immediately withdrew, and the door was closed.

The shrinking figure had no desire for food. It returned to the edge of the bed and what it thought about is hard to say, but at one time Philip Canning must have been the subject, for the face grew stern and angry, and then became infinitely sad. Later on Sheila Cornwall must have come into consideration, for the line of the mouth grew very straight, the face flushed and indignant, and the expression one of great resentment. Then Little David himself must have come up for judgment for, about eight o'clock, the shrinking figure seemed to shrivel up and diminish to half its size, and give every indication of a desire to dissolve and disappear entirely. Finally, on the stroke of ten, a fresh train of thought came to life, and the shrinking figure sat up with a gasp.

John Henry had not returned.

The influence of this thought impelled the shrinking figure to

rap on the dividing wall. Veronica, who sat in the next room, immediately came out into the passage.

"Well!" said Veronica. "What is the matter?"

"Veronica! He has not come back. Something may have happened to him!"

Veronica snorted.

"Nonsense," she said. "These theatrical people have detained him. He will be in presently. You go to bed. I shall wait up."

The voice of the shrinking figure came in tones of sudden panic, yet there was a quality about it that was absolutely assured.

"Veronica, you must not tell him anything! That must not happen. I shall go away altogether, if it is necessary, but never that. You know him as well as I do. If he thought that I had stayed here because—because . . . ! You know what he would do. It would not matter what he thought himself. He would think only of me. You must promise not to speak!"

Veronica promised on the condition of an immediate retiral to bed. This condition was granted and adhered to. Both Little David and Mabel Canning were simple and truthful people, so it did not occur to the shrinking figure to do otherwise.

It may have been the added comfort of lying at ease. It may not. That is a point difficult, nay impossible, to determine. The fact remains that the tenor of the thoughts of the figure between the bed-clothes became more pleasant. The change started with the fear of an accident to John Henry. A tormenting and terrible thought but one that bore pleasant consequences in its train—in the mind of the thinker. The thinker became a nurse, a nurse tending a fevered, tossing patient, very ill of course, but not for one moment in any real danger. The rest in bed would be good for the patient. This was an assured point. In this occupation Little David, Sheila, and many other subjects of annoyance were forgotten. Curiously enough Philip Canning was not. He was rich . . . ! Dreams are odd. They are so elastic and accommodating to the requirements of

the dreamer. As the clocks were striking midnight, the dream of the figure in the bed became reality in a manner of speaking. The figure commenced to dream in earnest. Sleep had intervened.

At half-past twelve, precise to the moment, John Henry burst into his own room as if blown there by a whirlwind. Veronica, who sat in her accustomed seat by the fire, thought that he had all the appearance of having been out in one. He looked—there is no other expression for it—wild, like an untamed horse. He also looked half starved. He was. He had not touched food since breakfast.

The whirlwind, which had started when he remembered about Little David in the train, and gone on increasing in velocity minute by minute, burst from his lips before Veronica had time to utter more than a startled gasp.

“I refuse to be parted from him,” said John Henry fiercely, “unless he wishes it himself. That would be different and I should raise no objection if it were for his own good. Otherwise he stays with me. My mind is made up!”

“Who do you think you are talking about?” asked Veronica.

“Little David,” said John Henry, looking, if possible, wilder than ever.

“Then you are too late with your decision,” said Veronica sedately, “for Little David has disappeared.”

It was rather hard on poor John Henry to hear this, in the middle of the night, after a day of harrowing experiences. He stood and stared at Veronica like a lost soul on the borders of torment.

“Fled!” he said in a dazed voice. “Where has he fled to?”

“Just what I wondered myself,” said Veronica, nodding sagely, “when I came down and found that he had vanished.”

John Henry sat down on a chair, buried his face in his hands, and groaned in a great bitterness of spirit.

“My God!” he said. “While I have been wandering all over

the country thinking of myself, the poor little fellow has been, perhaps, in the most terrible trouble. I am a selfish beast."

Veronica regarded his bent head with considerable affection, and a softened expression that sad oddly on her sallow, unlovely face.

"It must have been something exceptional that made you think of him," she said with assurance. "I did not believe it possible!"

"Think of—what do you mean?" asked John Henry wildly.

"Yourself," said Veronica shortly. "I did not know you knew such a person existed."

John Henry arose and executed the first few steps of what appeared to be an incantation to the gods of unrest. He paused in the middle of this occupation, and again sitting down, begged Veronica to tell him what had happened, what she had done, if she had any idea where Little David might be, and what she thought they ought to do.

Veronica said: "I was washing the first-floor landing."

"Soap that smells of paraffin," muttered John Henry. "I know the stuff well."

Veronica smiled and nodded.

"The front door bell rang but I paid no attention. Mrs. Baldwin was in the kitchen," explained Veronica with reserve, "and how could I know it was for you?"

John Henry half rose from his chair but relapsed at a gesture of indignation from Veronica.

"You must not start rushing about," she said. "What you want to do is to sit still and think." She paused for a moment to allow the remark to take root. "The first I heard was a voice calling on you, and somebody rapping; and when I looked down there was a man staring into your room. He saw me and came to the foot of the stairs, and when I saw his face I came down at once. I went to look for Little David to make sure that he was safe, but I could not see him, so I confined my attention

to the man. He wanted to see you—on a business matter, no doubt. I thought he might be after Little David, but he was not, for I asked him straight. He went away with a flea in his ear for I did not want him to return. You will probably have a letter in the morning.”

“But Little David!” exclaimed John Henry.

“He must have known the man and been afraid of him,” said Veronica, nodding sagely, “for I have not set eyes on the boy since then. I searched all over the place but he had vanished. My opinion is that the man was his father. When Little David is annoyed his mouth is not unlike the mouth of the man.”

John Henry arose stiffly, petrified by a sudden memory.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “Like Little David when his mouth is straight. Why, I have been worried by a resemblance to someone I know and I remember now who it is—Philip Canning! He cannot be the boy’s father. It is preposterous. He would never call here on business. What was the man like, Veronica?”

“The tallest, thinnest man I have ever set eyes on,” said Veronica.

John Henry’s state bordered on lunacy.

“It must be,” he exclaimed. “Was he very dignified, very severe and terrible, very much like a stone statue of something greater than a man? Did he frighten you and make you feel like a worm, ashamed of being alive?”

Veronica became alarmed but she also became indignant.

“Certainly not,” she said. “There was nothing exceptional about him at all. He seemed worried, and anxious, and his face was drawn and lined. He was like any other man, and he did not seem too tall because he was holding himself erect. I should like to see the man who would make me feel like a worm! He was more like one himself, for if he had not been in some distress or other, he would have been like a plank of wood—hard, and unbending, and unsympathetic.”

John Henry sat down.

"It is very mysterious," he said, "but it cannot be the man I think of. What have you done about Little David?"

"Nothing!" said Veronica shortly.

"Nothing!" repeated John Henry in dismay. "Veronica, you——?"

Veronica arose briskly to her feet and announced her intention of going to bed.

"You sit and think," she said. "Little David has disappeared, vanished completely so that I could not find him anywhere. I was on the first floor. This man, who might be his father, arrived. He spoke. I came down, and Little David had disappeared. He was not to be found anywhere. He has not returned. I have not worried at all for I thought that the boy would come back—if you desired it. So he will."

John Henry clasped his head in his hands.

"For heaven's sake do not go away," he said. "If I want the boy to come back, he will come back! Where is he? How can I tell him to come back? You will drive me mad!"

Veronica opened the door and stood half in, and half out, of the room.

"You think," she said profoundly. "You sit and think. There is quite a lot for you to think about. Think of yourself for example. What has made you go rushing out of the house as if something had bitten you of an evening?"

John Henry's appearance altered. He commenced to look wild again, and he also looked scared.

"Veronica!" he said in a voice of anguish. "I forgot to tell you. I am in love. I have just been told—I mean I have just found out to-day!"

Veronica seemed to be highly gratified by this astounding information.

"You think," she repeated and she nodded a great number of times, looking thereby rather like a Chinese idol with a moveable

head. "I could have told you that any time after you spent a night away from home—when I came to think about it. You think—hard, and remember that I am not worried about where Little David may be!"

She closed the door softly and went up the stairs to bed.

John Henry stood in front of the fire clutching his head. It is to be presumed that he followed Veronica's advice and thought—hard. He had all the signs of one so occupied, and that his thoughts were hard to grasp was clearly evident for he appeared to be thoroughly and completely lost. He was. He was also exceedingly hungry. Growing conscious of the latter fact, he desisted from thinking and proceeded, in a dazed fashion, to open the cupboard and forage for food. A small but dainty meal lay on the shelf, all ready, waiting it appeared, to be eaten. It was his unconsumed lunch. Little David had put it aside against his possible return.

John Henry smiled at the dishes. Little David and he were excellent companions. The thought of Sheila arose in his mind, and he grew alarmed. Little David might not take kindly to the idea of his marriage. The thought which had worried him for a long time—ever since the night at the Black Bull to be exact—returned with tremendous force, so that he felt unable to combat his own emotions thereby aroused.

"If only Little David had not been a boy!" he sighed, and then he experienced something in the nature of an electric shock.

He stood motionless before the cupboard for a long time, but his mind was far from motionless. John Henry, as has been stated before, was apt to accept what was placed before him without thought or suspicion, but when once his suspicions were aroused he saw everything with a remarkable clarity.

He left the cupboard, suddenly, as if driven by necessity to prove the truth of his own thoughts. He passed into the passage and tried to open the door of the adjoining room. It was locked. He listened intently at the keyhole and heard the sound of a soft

and regular breathing. The bed was occupied and the occupier was fast asleep.

John Henry returned to his own room in a species of muted exultation.

"That explains everything," he muttered, and he seemed to glow all over with excitement. He meditated for a time. "I have been a fool," he remarked a moment later, and then he added in all sincerity: "Thank God for it too." He thought of the night spent at the Black Bull, and of many nights, since then, spent in his own abode. "I wonder—!" he exclaimed suddenly, and then he added: "That would be too good to be true!"

At this point he remembered about Sheila.

"My hat!" he breathed in a voice of agony, and sat down on his chair in a daze.

After that John Henry commenced the occupation recommended by Veronica. He thought—hard . . . !

CHAPTER XVIII

THE AWAKENING OF JOHN HENRY MILLMAN

VERONICA, in some respects, was like the sun. She rose early. On the morning after her midnight conversation with John Henry she rose earlier than usual. There was that which she desired to find out before breakfast, and Veronica's time was very much occupied before that meal. She descended the stairs in a semi-sleeping condition and, as she passed John Henry's door, the thought crossed her mind that it was a beautiful morning. She could see the light streaming out on the floor. She was mildly astonished that she had not discovered this on rising, but, since the sun rose on the other side of the house from her room, it was not so astonishing as it might have been.

She reached the kitchen and commenced to work rapidly. The Milk arrived, whistling, at the foot of the area steps. Veronica had a few words to say to the Milk. She went out with that intent. The Milk, with a knowledge of shortcomings in his conduct—he was young and flippant, but friendly disposed towards Veronica—attempted to be pleasant.

He said: "When are we ever going to catch a sight of the sun? These dull mornings give me the creeps!"

"Dull mornings!" said Veronica startled. "Dull—oh! He has forgotten to turn out the light. I must have been half asleep."

She departed suddenly, leaving the Milk in a state of considerable astonishment, and some doubt as to the morality of her conduct during the night.

"Anyone else!" he remarked to himself as he climbed up to the street, "but not Veronica, poor soul," and he sighed.

The Milk, it appeared, was not a bad fellow. He was not. He had, what many people have not, a heart. That is why he appears here, abruptly, and for no obvious reason. He is worthy of notice.

Veronica listened at John Henry's door, heard the rattling of dishes, and opening the door, looked in. John Henry was seated at the table and he appeared to be consuming the last fragment of a meal. He also appeared to be astonished at the sight of Veronica.

He said: "Have you not gone to bed yet, Veronica?"

Veronica said profoundly: "Oh! I see you are awake! Thank goodness for that." Then she added: "Not been in bed! I have just got up. It is past seven o'clock in the morning!"

John Henry rose briskly. He had not the appearance of one who had missed his rest, and he had the appearance of one who looks forward to an active and interesting day.

"I want to have a long talk with you," he said. "I want to have it now. You gave me an excellent piece of advice last night, Veronica. I want to thank you for it, and for not giving me any more. Bless your dear old face!"

The dear old face in question, receiving an unaccustomed salutation, grew somewhat twisted and presented a very curious spectacle; but that is an immaterial point.

"Better come down to the kitchen," said Veronica gruffly. "We can talk there without being disturbed."

She preceded John Henry down the stairs.

"I'm a woman inside in spite of my face," she remarked, halfway down, "and a woman—if she is a woman—hopes life will give her something to look after. That is not for me, but there is no reason why I should wish others to want it."

John Henry made no direct reply to this, but once they were in the kitchen, he made a statement with great assurance.

"If ever I have enough money to live in a house, you have

got to come and 'do' for me whether you want to or not. I shall just carry you away in a cab."

The prospect appeared to hold no terrors for Veronica.

"You sit down there," she said, placing a chair on one side of the fire and sitting down herself on the other, "and carry on. I'm listening."

She did this for some considerable time. The night, it appeared, had not been wasted by John Henry. It also appeared that he had been thinking—hard. His grasp of the facts of the case known to Veronica surprised her. The one point he appeared to have missed was Little David's name and family, and the fact that he had been previously known to the Cornwalls. She said nothing, but she almost commenced to regard him in a new light as a person of common-sense and wisdom. She was saved from this appealing blunder by two things. The one was that, although he now appeared to have grasped the reason for Sheila's behaviour, yet he had actually proposed to her in all sincerity. The other was a point over which Veronica snorted in exceeding disdain. It was occasioned by a simple remark of John Henry's on the subject of Little David.

"The discovery is a great joy to me," he said, "because I could not understand myself. From the very first the little fellow moved me to a profound compassion—the same would have happened to anyone, I was fortunate to be on the spot—but the matter went further than that. It puzzled and distressed me then, but now I am glad. Your remarks about my being able to bring Little David back puzzled me exceedingly at the time. Of course he must come back. The poor child has nothing to fear from me. He shall remain till he wishes to go. You must promise to say not one word of my awakening to the facts of the case. That would be cruel, for how could Little David face me then with happiness?"

"How indeed!" exclaimed Veronica drily, and then, as

already stated, she snorted in disdain. "I can see," she said fiercely, "that you are not wide-awake yet!"

"What do you mean?" asked John Henry in surprise.

"Nothing," said Veronica shortly. "Pay no attention. I talk nonsense at times," and although she was longing to add a few enlightening words, she refrained.

Veronica was a decent woman, and one decent woman does not give another decent woman away. She leaves it to chance—when she is assured that the ultimate and desired result is inevitable.

"What are you going to do?" she asked after a moment.

John Henry appeared to be quite decided on this. He commenced to tell Veronica what he intended to do, and that, for some reason or other, seemed to take her breath away at first, and make her angry; but after she had recovered, she grew pleased, then she grew amused, and finally she laughed and seemed highly gratified. She sat on one side of the fire with her hands on her knees, her body bent forward, and her head inclined to catch every word; and she nodded her head as John Henry explained each point in detail. He sat on the other side and talked, and his face glowed with enthusiasm as he did so. He waved his hands, and grew excited, and was absolutely absorbed in the subject in question. He might, in fact, have been a species of highly-animated spirit, attempting to hypnotise Veronica with his own enthusiasm.

It was a very odd sight. Indeed, of all the odd sights in London that morning—there must be many of them when you think of thousands of queer figures rising like wraiths from their beds—this one was, perhaps, the oddest. John Henry with his enthusiasm, and his glowing face—he was pleasant to behold at the moment. Veronica with her lop-sided figure, leaning forward, drinking in every word. One on either side of the fire in the dingy cavern of a kitchen. Innumerable breakfasts in process of congealing on the range and the fire dying down to a glimmer.

Then there were the bells! I had forgotten about them; the bells outside the kitchen door, I mean.

They had started to ring when John Henry commenced to explain what he was going to do, and they went on ringing all the time. Not one bell, or two bells, or even three bells, but bunches of bells ringing fiercely at one and the same time. Veronica was bell-hardened. She may, or may not have heard. It was difficult to tell. John Henry was not bell-hardened, but he was too engrossed in his plans to think about them. Neither of them paid the slightest attention. The bells went on, and so did John Henry. What would eventually have happened, whether the indignant lodgers would have descended in a mass and finished off the pair of them in an outburst of wrath, is hard to say. What actually did happen was this. John Henry, reaching a point in his discourse over which he appeared to have difficulty, paused, and in this pause they both heard a voice calling on Veronica, and the voice belonged to Little David. The voice, also, sounded alarmed.

"Veronica! Veronica! Are you ill? I seem to have heard the bells ringing for ages!"

"She is afraid I might be ill," breathed Veronica proudly to John Henry.

John Henry ignored the sex of the pronoun.

"That is all right, Little David," he called. "I have come down to give Veronica a hand. She was late last night, waiting up for me. You must dress and come down to help her yourself."

A startled gasp, half of astonishment, and half of relief, was the sole answer to this remark except for the fact that Little David, judging from the sounds above, immediately retired to his room and hurriedly closed the door.

"That will bring Little David back all right," muttered Veronica, and she seemed to be half displeased at the prospect.

She commenced to do strange things with the various breakfasts, and in this John Henry helped her. If you ever have to live

in a cheap London lodging-house, take my advice and avoid the kitchen when the meals are being prepared. You will be sorry if you disregard this well-meant warning. By this means, in a marvellously short space of time, the demands of the various bells were satisfied.

"You were going to say something more," said Veronica, when this result had been reached. "What was it?"

John Henry immediately became reserved.

"That was of no consequence," he said with dignity. "It was only a foolish fancy on my part."

"Well!" said Veronica. "I want to know what it was!"

"I thought," said John Henry austerely, "that if the impossible came to pass, and it chanced that Little David cared for me in that fashion. I thought the programme might be added to, but not altered. It was an absurd idea. Little David is not mad. No woman would be so foolish on my account."

Veronica dropped a cooked rasher of bacon in her exasperation, and made no attempt to dust the same on replacement.

"You love her?" she said suddenly.

"I do," said John Henry quietly—very quietly.

"Then go and tell her so," said Veronica.

John Henry shook his head.

"Never," he said with energy. "That would be wickedly unkind. Quite apart from Little David's feelings, there might be some absurd idea of gratitude towards myself. I should not dream of doing such a thing."

Little David, it will be remembered, had made a somewhat similar statement to Veronica on the subject of John Henry himself.

"Between the pair of you," said Veronica, with resignation, "I do not know what to say or do."

"You must promise to keep quiet and do nothing except what I have said," exclaimed John Henry eagerly.

Veronica pondered.

"What would you do supposing you found out that the 'impossible,' as you call it, had occurred?"

John Henry clasped Veronica by the arm.

"I should marry Little David at once," he said with assurance.

"I believe you would," said Veronica in a species of wonderment. "I can see you doing it and asking her consent after it was all over. It would be just like you." She prodded a hissing sausage viciously with her fork. "Very good," she said, "I promise to keep my mouth shut to everybody, and I'll do what you ask."

"Splendid!" said John Henry. "Now I must go out and telephone."

He went, without his hat or coat, and it had started to rain hard.

"I wonder if he has any pennies in his pocket," muttered Veronica, as she watched him pass along the street.

He had, and he had not to wait long for his call. In the Red House young George was standing staring thoughtfully out of the window when the telephone bell rang. The rest of the Cornwall family had not yet appeared for the day. He lifted the receiver, started at the sound of John Henry's voice, and seemed in a half mind to leave the instrument. He did not, however, and very soon his aspect changed. He listened with attention, amusement, and a growing enthusiasm; but he ended by being very contrite.

"You *are* a good fellow," he exclaimed, "and you do make me feel a beast. You are quite right, my want of a name has kept my mouth shut. It could not be otherwise. I shall do just whatever you please."

What John Henry replied to this is unknown, but he emerged from the telephone box and scared a stout old lady out of her wits—this was in the underground at Paddington station—by exclaiming "Absolutely absurd!" in an indignant voice directly behind her back. Since she was from the provinces and was

thinking nervously on the subject of her new hat, her alarm was not to be wondered at. The hat, by the way, was absurd, and so her female Town relatives told her forthwith. They would not have had the courage to do this, for she was rich, if it had not been for John Henry's utterance.

Several immediate results transpired from the conversation with George. That young man executed a species of war-dance in the hall. After breakfast he enticed Sheila into the garden, spoke to her with great solemnity, and she returned to the house looking both scared and distracted. No telegram went from the Red House to John Henry. A telegram arrived at the Red House from John Henry. It was for Sheila and it said:

"Excuse hurried departure yesterday. Shall arrive this morning to talk to your father. Much love. John Henry."

The receipt of this telegram unsettled Sheila for the rest of the morning. The grave view of the matter taken by George and his advice, which seemed both convincing and true, unsettled her far more. The poor girl was quite alarmed, and George had great difficulty in preventing himself from immediately dispelling her distress. He was helped, however, by a knowledge of what it might mean to them both, so he remained silent.

John Henry, having despatched his telegram, returned home, and on his own door-step he encountered the postman. There was a letter for him and the inscription on the back proclaimed that it came from Canning and Canning. A cloud arose on John Henry's horizon. He read the letter before entering the house. He did not for one moment believe that Philip Canning was the caller of the previous day who had disturbed Little David; but he did want to face Little David with a mind free of all disagreeable matters.

The reading of the letter puzzled him. It seemed to strike an entirely new note in regard to his dealings with that firm. There was almost something humble about it, yet the written words held only one meaning. John Henry was asked, pleasantly and

courteously, to call at the office at the time which suited him best that day, or if he could not come that day to name a time and day when he could come. The reason given for this was one that sounded quite normal and feasible—his advice was asked on a pressing and important matter. The point which astounded John Henry was that his presence seemed to be asked for as a favour. Accepting this view the letter had the aspect of an appeal. It was not credible. John Henry decided that he was growing light-headed from the pressure of circumstances. He dismissed the matter from his mind. The discomfort of the coming interview did not depart so easily nevertheless.

It is greatly to John Henry's credit that Little David did not, for one second, suspect that he had made any discovery of moment. He did think that John Henry seemed especially quiet and attentive in his manner and bearing towards him, but this merely provoked a sigh and a slight return of the wistful sadness of the previous day. The sadness, however, was rapidly dispelled by a remark made by John Henry at the termination of breakfast.

"I have a business appointment this afternoon," he said, "and it is preying on my mind. It will be an ordeal, and it has driven an important piece of information from my head. I have kept the matter a secret, for I wished to tell you this morning and take you by surprise. You are coming with me to the dress rehearsal of my play to-night. You will have a box and no one will worry you there except, perhaps, myself. The Cornwalls will be in the next box but I wanted we two—you and I alone—to see the thing by ourselves. We made it, you know."

Little David was overjoyed at the prospect. He was so thoroughly excited that he entirely forgot about Sheila, his own troubles, and the dangers of appearing in public places where he might meet with a recognition that was undesirable. He thought about these things later on, but John Henry had left by then. He, it appeared, had an exceedingly busy day before him, and would not return till just before supper-time.

Veronica had a little to say on this subject.

"You seem in a great hurry," she remarked, as John Henry was dashing out at the door.

"I am," said John Henry. "I am going down to the Red House, and after that I have business to attend to, and then there is the theatre at night. I am in a hurry."

Veronica seemed perturbed.

"No necessity to do everything in one day," she said. "I should have thought you wanted to rest after being awake all night!"

John Henry danced on the door-step and waved his arms.

"I must go out," he said, "and arrange matters." He stopped dancing and caught Veronica by the arm. "How can I stay in there, now that I am awake? I—I just could not keep my mouth shut or my arms still. I shall be able to do so—when I come back."

He departed, suddenly, like a bullet shot out of a gun, and went straight to his objective, brushing aside indignant station officials who sought to bar his progress, and boarded the nine-fifteen fast train with an utter disregard of the fact that he had no ticket. In this tempestuous fashion he arrived, shortly after eleven o'clock, on the door-step of the Red House and sought an immediate interview with George Cornwall and Muggie. They, simple souls, imagined that he had just been in receipt of a legacy or some similar piece of unexpected good fortune. His appearance was so exceedingly elevated and so excessively assured.

They were rapidly disillusioned, however, and they were also struck dumb with astonishment. In fact they were so astonished that they sat with open mouths and glared at John Henry as if he were something new that they had never seen, thought of, or even imagined. John Henry achieved this result by his first few words, and the rest of his discourse was, more or less, lost on them in consequence. They both emerged from that interview in a daze.

"I am in love," said John Henry, speaking with assurance,

"and I have been in love for weeks without knowing anything about it. I do now by a fortunate chance—a most fortunate chance. Yesterday, in the motor shed, I asked Sheila to marry me. She did not say no. I can hardly believe," continued John Henry with absolute truth, "that any woman would care for me in that fashion. Such a thought seems too good to be true. I want a marriage arranged as soon as possible before—before she changes her mind, for example."

At this point John Henry paused to take breath, and George Cornwall and Muggie ceased to listen coherently and became lost.

John Henry went on. He went on talking what seemed to the two dazed listeners to be little short of lunacy. He covered a great deal of ground in a very short time, and the one point he failed to broach was—money. This, as a matter of fact, had not occurred to him. It would not. The disconcerting part of the entire situation lay in his manner of speaking. He was so obviously in earnest, so absolutely assured, and so happily confident that his intentions were kindly, correct, and the best for Sheila. They were, only George Cornwall and Muggie did not grasp the true object of these intentions. What they did grasp was that John Henry wished to marry Sheila without delay, and this disturbed them because they were not at all certain of what that young woman's views might be. It was quite impossible to hint this to the enthusiastic talker nevertheless. That task was beyond any inhabitant of the Red House.

In the middle of a description of a glowing future the sound of the local omnibus, groaning its way to the station to meet the fast up train, came to John Henry's ears. He paused on a word, and leapt to his feet.

"I must catch that bus," he said, and fled from the room.

As George Cornwall remarked to Muggie, when they were capable of talking in a natural fashion, he would look on that wretched bus with thankfulness for the rest of his life. If it had not been for the bus, he opined, Sheila might have been

spirited away, married, and permanently settled for life, before they had time to collect their scattered thoughts. As it was they had time, but when they sent for Sheila, then things once more became chaotic. She entered the room like a criminal about to be faced with a crime . . . ! It was very amusing, but even young George failed to see the humour at the moment.

"I guessed as much," said George Cornwall dismally, after listening to Sheila's explanation. "I was certain that it was the result of some mad plan of yours. I believe, my dear, that your intentions were good, but how you could think that Millman would immediately fall into the arms of Mabel Canning because you were making love to him, beats me altogether."

Sheila, who had been drooping, recovered a trifle.

"He is a man and Mabel is a woman. They are both in love with each other. They only want some one to waken them up a little. I would like to shake Mabel Canning. What right has little David to go on existing so long? I wanted to waken John Henry to the fact that he is in love, but I did not expect him to imagine that it was with me!"

"Well, he does," said George Cornwall, "and he thinks that you are in love with him; and it is you who will have to disillusion him, for I cannot after listening to what he had to say."

Sheila gasped and became infinitely distressed.

"I—I cannot," she said. "He will think me such a beast. You must do it for me, George. It is all your fault for suggesting the arrival of Little David at this house."

George shook his head in a grave and determined fashion.

"No," he said. "That I cannot do. Millman must find out for himself, if you do not explain. The task is beyond me after what I have said to him."

"What will he think of me?" groaned Sheila.

"Millman said that Little David knew nothing about it," remarked Muggie, "but no doubt your previous behaviour has made the young man think quite a lot."

A ray of hope dawned on Sheila's face.

"In that case," she said, "we can hope for the best. My plan may turn out well after all. Little David or no Little David, Mabel Canning is a woman, and if this piece of information does not make the young man vanish, nothing on earth will. I know what I shall do. At the theatre to-night——"

She paused, or rather she did not pause but the Cornwall family, rising in wrath, drowned the sound of her voice with urgent entreaties to leave the matter alone and attempt no further complications. She had done quite enough harm as it was, and, perhaps, she had. George Cornwall, after the general outburst had subsided, added a remark on his own, and there seemed to be a fair amount of sense in it. So much sense, in fact, that Sheila could find nothing to say in reply.

"The question to worry about is not what you are going to do, but what Millman himself will do," he said. "In his present state I should not be surprised at his doing anything."

At the moment John Henry was harmlessly engaged in repairing his general appearance in a friendly door-way, previous to entering the dread portals of Mead House and coming before the all-seeing eye of the majestic trio who were Canning and Canning of publishing fame. The strength of his good intentions towards Sheila had carried him half way down Charing Cross Road before he recalled the general untidiness of his dress occasioned by his experiences overnight, his rapid transit to and from Tipping Horley, and a lunch consumed at the refreshment bar at Paddington station. His hands were not clean. He was uneasy on the subject of his collar. He had an acute memory of some foreign matter on the top of the barrel in the lorry, and he seemed to exude a decided flavour of paraffin.

John Henry was appalled. He passed the door of Mead House three times before he could summon sufficient courage to enter. He had wild thoughts of rushing home in a cab, changing his clothes, and returning; but he knew that by then it would be too

late. The office would be shut for the night. He paused beside a seated musician with one leg who churned a doleful tune out of a musical box.

"You are a coward," said John Henry scornfully, addressing himself. "You want to run away!"

The seated one took exception to the remark, to the intense gratification of a couple of small boys, and John Henry disappeared into the open doorway. If it had not been for this, he might be waiting there still.

"Never mind if you do smell of paraffin," said John Henry, comforting himself outside the office door. "You are awake now, and that is a blessing!"

His awakening was destined to become rapidly more complete.

The pert young thing disappeared from the outer office before he had time to shut the door. This startled him, for he had the impression that his appearance had scared her into flight. She returned in a few seconds, and requesting him to follow, passed down a long corridor. John Henry went as one might follow the headsman to the block. She opened a door and stood on one side for him to enter. He crossed the threshold and paused in astonishment. This was not the room of harrowing memories. It was small, and bright, and cheerful. It was a human apartment. There were three human beings in it. Sinclair Dodds and Ralph Seymour stood in front of the fire. Philip Canning stood by the window. All three of them appeared to be uncomfortable, unhappy, and ill at ease. John Henry had every right to be astonished.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Millman," said Philip Canning in a low voice. "Will you please be seated!"

Sinclair Dodds and Ralph Seymour uttered inaudible greetings. John Henry sat down in a species of trance. The atmosphere of the room became tense and strained. Ralph Seymour turned round to poke the fire but gave up the attempt in discomfiture. Sinclair Dodds was already hard at the task. Philip Canning

cleared his throat, coughed, and commenced to play with the buttons of his coat.

"I—I have asked you to call because—" he commenced, and broke off before the impossibility of proceeding. He made a curious, helpless gesture with his hands and glanced unhappily at his two partners.

Each of these two gentlemen appeared to expect the other to speak, but it was not necessary for either of them to utter a word. John Henry had leapt to his feet and stood gazing at Philip Canning with very mixed feelings, to judge by his face, across which astonishment, enlightenment, indignation, and other emotions appeared to pass. The curious, helpless motion of Philip Canning's hands was the cause of this; that and his mouth, face, and general appearance. John Henry had discovered Little David's identity. He had also discovered that Little David's father was in pain, and the discovery moved him to sudden action. He crossed the room and touched the tall, thin man, a man of immense dignity no longer, on the sleeve.

"I have no right to ask," he said, "but you seem to me to be in trouble. If I can help you, I shall be happy!"

Philip Canning responded to the touch. His hands closed on John Henry's arm. His voice came with the ring of sincerity that rises from pain.

"It is my child," he said. "The only thing I have in the world, and—she is lost!"

As Ralph Seymour remarked subsequently to Sinclair Dodds, this statement, even at that advanced stage, astounded him coming from Philip Canning. Sinclair Dodd's retort was simple. He said: "You are not a father. I am and so is he. You do not understand."

Philip Canning was alive.

"Tell me about it," said John Henry, and he seated himself with his back to the window.

Philip Canning told him. He narrated his version of Little

David's story and he made no attempt to spare himself, but he clung to the theory of his daughter's guilt. John Henry grew very fierce and indignant at that part in the story, but his indignation lessened when he thought that this proud man had reached the point of longing for his daughter as he imagined her to be. There was, according to John Henry, something very fine about this which more than made up for the injustice of the accusation. He perceived, also, that Philip Canning had not discovered the possession of a daughter till he had lost her, and as he thought this, Philip Canning himself said so.

"All the blame in the matter rests with me," he said, and it was not easy for him to say it. "She has been left too much alone. I had a child . . . it is so easy to arrive at a point of view which remains . . . she remained—there. After I had lost her and she did not return then I found out that she was mine, my own flesh, more to me than anything else on earth. I have had time to think." He was silent for a moment. "I want to take her into my arms, to tell her that what she has done is forgiven and forgotten, to say that we two must live for each other, to face the world with my child no matter what she is or has done."

John Henry made an unexpected remark.

"I am afraid that would be a fatal mistake," he said with assurance.

Philip Canning started as if he had been stung. Ralph Seymour glanced indignantlly at Sinclair Dodds. *He* had first thought of consulting John Henry Millman, even if the girl's foster-mother had subsequently given the same advice. This was *his* blame Sinclair Dodds became unhappy. They were all uneasily silent, and apprehensively attentive of John Henry, who appeared to be thinking profoundly. He was. He had reason in so doing. There was quite a lot for him to think about.

"A most fatal mistake," repeated John Henry suddenly, "because since you know nothing of your daughter, how do you

know that she is guilty? She is an unknown quantity to you. You have no right to attribute evil motives where they may not exist!"

Philip Canning frowned and the line of his mouth grew exceedingly straight.

"I am sorry to have troubled you," he said, after a moment of silence. "If my daughter had not been guilty she would not have gone away. The matter is self-evident."

John Henry leapt to his feet and danced. He also waved his arms, and he seemed angry, exceedingly angry and indignant.

"You have seen her," he said. "You are her father, yet you can sit there and utter statements that make my flesh creep!" His hand shot out suddenly, and a finger pointed accusingly at Philip Canning's mouth. "What have you given to your child along with your name? Have you given her a mouth like that? If so and she were innocent, she would walk the streets and live on crusts rather than come back to you who believe her guilty." His voice altered and the indignation went from his face. "I know," he said gently, "that you have suffered, that you are suffering still, but your accusations are so blindly assured. She must be innocent. I know she must be innocent. That is the reason why you have failed to find her. You have searched for a time, but how long has she been searching in vain for you! All her life, I should imagine, poor child, and now she has gone—for good. It is easy to understand."

There was an interval of uncomfortable silence during which John Henry appeared to meditate on some sad and perplexing problem, and the two junior partners glanced apprehensively at Philip Canning in a guilty and apologetic fashion. That gentleman—to speak in terms of absolute truth—appeared to be waging a battle between his mouth and some other, hidden, and possibly useless organ.

"She will never come back if you start forgiving her for what she has not done," said John Henry suddenly. "I understand and

appreciate what you have gone through to reach that decision, but she might not. It would only drive deeper the hurt that you, her father, thought such things of her. She must have lived for years with an image of hope that was you in her heart. You have shattered that image. Now you will come before her judgment as a stranger. She has had no father. She has been fighting against a knowledge of this, and now it has conquered."

Ralph Seymour, reduced to a recurrence of his accustomed state of mental subservience in the presence of his senior partner, uttered a pertinent remark.

"Mr. Dodds made the suggestion to tell you the tale . . . !" He glanced accusingly at Sinclair Dodds. "You speak as if the girl were outside the door waiting to walk in. You seem to forget that she is lost and must first of all be found!"

Sinclair Dodds, having reached a point of confusion where reason did not influence him, gave birth to a fresh complication of his original idea.

"Perhaps Mr. Millman knows where she is," he said hopefully, and he did not speak in sarcasm but in a simple, instinctive, and wholly unreasoning fashion.

John Henry walked towards the door.

"No," he said with decision. "I do not know where Mr. Canning's daughter is, but I am going to try and find out. I am going to try to-night, and I hope"—he paused and his face became of a sudden quite exceptionally attractive to look at. "I hope that I shall succeed."

Philip Canning arose in a state of emotion where annoyance, eagerness, and astonishment, were fairly equally blended.

"Mr. Millman!" he commenced in annoyance. "Have you heard of a girl who might be my child?" he continued in eagerness. "Whatever is it?" he ended in astonishment.

An expression of horror had swept over John Henry's face, and his right hand had gone up in a gesture commanding silence and attention.

John Henry listened. Philip Canning listened. They all listened, but there was nothing to be heard except the sound of the clock in the outer office striking the hour. Since this was a habit of the clock in question, the three members of the firm of Canning and Canning thought nothing of it. John Henry, apparently did.

"Six!" he gasped and fled, and on this, as on a previous occasion, he left his hat behind him; but the leaving of it was different.

The hat was devoid of pawn-tickets. It did not arrive home before him—they did not find it in the office till next morning. It was not the only hat he possessed. On the previous occasion, too, nothing but a pleased satisfaction had remained in the minds of the Three Mighty Beings of Mead House. On this one the satisfaction was absent. The Three Mighty Beings were absent also, and in place of these pleasing things there remained nothing but three startled and somewhat helpless men who did not know quite what to think. Perhaps they were justified in this. John Henry Millman was a disconcerting creature to deal with. He did things in his own fashion—supposing that you credit him with sufficient sense to have a fashion of his own.

"We must have a cab. It would never do to be late. Little David would be utterly disappointed," muttered the last-named gentleman, as he swarmed up to the top of a passing bus.

"In truth an excellent thing," he remarked aloud, as the thought struck him that there would be no time to lose—time that might have proved irksome, faced by Little David, with the tumult of his own thoughts rising and raging in his head.

"No doubt," said a voice beside him, "but you cannot do it on me. I saw you get on. Where do you want to go?"

John Henry answered immediately without turning round.

"The theatre," he said. "The Bigpit Theatre, to a dress rehearsal of my play!"

"My hat!" said the voice, "and it is poor, hard-worked creatures like myself that have to put up with them!"

John Henry swung round and faced the speaker, an incensed bus-conductor, in great astonishment.

"Oh!" he remarked profoundly. "Yes, of course! You want my fare. I had forgotten."

The bus-conductor departed muttering. John Henry's mind reverted to the problems which faced him. He thought, and he grew very sad yet also very happy as he thought, or so it seemed judging by his expression. As it happened there was no one on the top of the bus to see this, so it did not matter.

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID FORGETS HIMSELF

THERE is no necessity to say anything about John Henry's play, yet it requires a chapter to itself. This may sound strange, but it is not. As you read on you will understand. John Henry was very glad he had written that play. He was more than glad, he was filled with a sense of wondering exaltation that he, of all people on the earth, should have been chosen for such a marvellous joy and happiness. The play was a first effort. There were, no doubt, points about it calling for improvement. There were, perhaps, points which could not be improved. It is needless to say anything about either. The play remained in the hands of the wise ones who are able to criticise such matters. It was in good, generous, and kindly hands without doubt.

John Henry and Little David arrived at the theatre in a cab. John Henry had a box, a box next the stage. They reached that point of vantage as the curtain rose on the first act.

A dress rehearsal is a dress rehearsal, that and nothing else, but to an author who has lived through the lives of his characters, wept over their sorrows, and thrilled to their joys, it is perhaps, something more. He sees the creatures of his fancy in the appropriate dress, listens to their voices speaking the thoughts that have had birth in his own mind and heart, and does all this in the presence of a crowd of his fellow-creatures. It is all very interesting, somewhat trying, and exceedingly disconcerting.

John Henry would not have been able to face the ordeal if it had not been for Little David. He saved the situation in more ways than one.

When you take into consideration the fact that, at a point in the production of the piece, John Henry had suddenly gone mad, demanded information as to the name of the author, expressed a fitting astonishment on being told that he himself was to blame, and subsequently carried on to such an extent that the powers of management had retired into the background to prophesy total ruin to everything and everybody concerned; when you take this into consideration, and add the additional fact that this state of affairs had continued and culminated in an outburst of managerial anguish on the day previous to the dress rehearsal, then you may grasp what an extraordinary accomplishment it was that John Henry was in the theatre at all.

Left to himself he would have fled from Town, and might never have been heard of again. It is quite likely. As it was he sat boldly in the corner of the box next the stage, in full view of the audience, and he gave no manifestation of uneasiness. He appeared, however, to be glowing all over with pleasure and happiness, and he continued to glow in an increasing degree till he might almost be said to exude a positive light of joy. It was very odd, extremely human, and quite understandable. John Henry had completely forgotten about his play. At least he had not forgotten about it, but it remained at the back of his mind, a small thing of no importance. He scarcely glanced at the stage, and the voices of the players passed unheeded. Little David occupied all his thoughts, all his attention. In the face of his finished work in progress of production John Henry, without pausing even to give the matter a moment of thought, realized of what small importance it was compared to the realities of life. That is the reason why this play of John Henry's requires a chapter to itself.

Little David sat in the corner of the box with an uninterrupted view of the stage, entirely hidden except for an odd hand or arm from the sight of the audience; and when the curtain rose on the first act, Little David said "Oh!" and promptly forgot about a

number of things including, at times, even John Henry himself. Incidentally he entirely forgot about the young gentleman known to John Henry as Little David. He seemed to have mislaid him in some strange fashion. He had, you will remember, materially helped in the work of writing the piece, and it is also possible that he might have a fairly strong interest in anything emanating from John Henry. It is hard to say, but the fact remains that he sat, and watched, and grew more and more excited as the play progressed. It was very pathetic, like a young mother watching the antics of her first child, and appealing to a third party for sympathy and approval.

He appealed to John Henry at every point of the play which pleased or touched him. There were many points, and it is quite unnecessary to state that John Henry responded to each and every appeal. He did not forget, however, that Little David *was* Little David, although this was not so easy to bear in mind as you might think. It was all very odd, and, no doubt, exceedingly foolish. Sheila Cornwall simplified the matter for John Henry. I do not believe that he would have been able to remember that Little David must continue to be Little David if it had not been for Sheila.

She sat in the next box in full view of John Henry who faced her, and, although she watched the play with interest and approval, she watched John Henry with a scared apprehension. Since she was unable to see Little David, this is not to be wondered at. George Cornwall, who was also in the box, caught occasional glimpses of John Henry and he also was disturbed and unsettled. Young George, who sat in the background, saw nothing but the stage and gave himself up in a whole-hearted fashion to an enjoyment of the proceedings thereon enacted.

Sheila, you will remember, was faced with the task of disillusioning John Henry on the subject of her feelings towards him. During the progress of the play that task, already difficult, assumed the aspect of an utter impossibility. John Henry was so obviously

happy. He was so absolutely oblivious of the play. He was so tenderly affectionate in the glances he cast at her, and his actions were so sudden and disconcerting. Little David, in the most quiet and natural fashion, was at the bottom of all this. It was very amusing.

Moments of emotion found him clinging to John Henry's sleeve, and what could John Henry do but direct his gaze at Sheila? If he looked at Little David—well, that young gentleman was only represented by his clothes. Odd little incidents found him smiling in a tender and reminiscent fashion and murmuring: "It is just what you would do!" Points of emotion found him sitting tense, and strained, and tragic; and the intervals—well, during the intervals Little David relapsed right back into his corner and sat in a kind of trance; but he retained a hold on John Henry's coat as if he were afraid he might run away. Mabel Canning, you will remember, had spent years offering all the deep places in her affectionate heart to one who had blindly ignored the offering. There is small wonder that John Henry found it necessary to pay a considerable amount of attention to Sheila Cornwall. He did. In fact he paid so much that the poor girl felt impelled to return the same in kind.

This happened during the interval before the curtain went up for the final act, and Sheila, spurred on by her own unsettled thoughts, achieved a result which startled George Cornwall, astonished young George, and affronted the young person who inhabited the clothes of Little David so much that Little David nearly returned. He would have done so, doubtless, if the curtain had not risen and cut the matter short.

Sheila had been, for a long time, meditating the saying of a few words to John Henry. She grasped her last opportunity and wishing, by the medium of her generous heart, to respond a little to John Henry's advances, and having at the same time the strongest distaste to so doing, she leant over the edge of the box

in an attitude that was not strictly in accordance with a proper and fitting maiden modesty.

"Wonderful!" she said to John Henry in an uneven voice. "We are all so proud of you. I am, but perhaps I have added reason to be so."

As George Cornwall said afterwards, he did not know which to be the most sorry for, Sheila or John Henry. The speech cost Sheila quite a considerable effort.

Little David was affronted. The quiver in Sheila's voice, what could be seen of her attitude, and the latter part of her speech were quite sufficient to recall him from his dreaming thoughts. It was quite impossible to say anything. A man can not. He can only think and sometimes look. Little David did both.

John Henry, perceiving all this, leant past Little David and clasped Sheila's hands in his own. He did this because it was necessary for him to clasp the hands of some one, and the hands he desired to clasp he could not. That was impossible for several reasons. Little David objected to being touched for one!

The curtain rose and the play went on. Little David again became enthralled and oblivious of most things. The incident, however, remained at the back of his mind; and this, without doubt, helped to heighten the climax at the end of the piece. After the curtain had gone down for the last time and the audience was enthusiastically applauding the players, Little David forgot that he had ever existed. He forgot about himself absolutely and entirely. After applauding with the rest, he turned away from the stage and applauded John Henry. His face was quite flushed, and excited, and softened, at the moment; and he looked, well, he looked exceedingly attractive.

I do not know just how it happened, but it could not have happened at a worse time. John Henry, unable to remain still, had risen to his feet. Little David had risen also—still clapping. They faced each other and I believe they forgot about the play, the players, everything and everybody but themselves. Little

David forgot about Little David, and John Henry forgot that Little David disliked to be touched. At the most unfortunate moment the principal lady on the stage, glancing up at the box, saw John Henry and pointed. The attention of the audience was distracted. The stage people commenced to applaud. The audience continued to do so. They all gazed up, and they all laughed.

It was the laugh that brought Little David back of a sudden. That and Sheila's indignant face peering round into the box.

"Well, I never did!" said that young woman, but her voice was more relieved than indignant.

Little David returned, as you might say, with a click.

"What is the matter?" he demanded fiercely. "Why should one man not embrace another?"

Why not indeed!

As John Henry remarked afterwards, the British reserve in these matters was absurd—perfectly absurd. There was no reason why affections should not be outwardly shown even between two such uninteresting things as male objects usually are. At the moment, however, he paid no attention to anything but Little David. John Henry was exceedingly happy.

The audience continued to cheer. John Henry would not have known what to do if he had been alone. He would have been lost and felt inclined to sink into the floor in a sudden and permanent fashion. Little David made this quite unnecessary. John Henry knew exactly what to do, and he did it.

He drew Little David forward, raised his hand in a gesture of negation, pointed to Little David, and commenced to clap himself. The audience, mystified but good-natured, followed suit. Little David, brought thus suddenly into the public eye, became exceedingly reserved and bashful. He stood still, for he did not know quite what to do, and his hands, fluttering in a helpless fashion, seemed to be searching for something to grasp. John Henry, perceiving this, seized them without warning and drew

him to the shelter of the back of the box. At that moment there was a knock, the door of the box opened, and Philip Canning looked in. He seemed disturbed, and distracted, and exceedingly unsettled; and he spoke at once as if the words had been quivering on his lips for hours. They had.

"Mr. Millman!" he said. "You must forgive this intrusion. I have waited out the entire performance in an agony of unrest, but I can wait no longer. Tell me! Do you, in truth, know anything of where my child may be?"

You may think that this, taking the facts of the situation into consideration, was a remarkable utterance; but it was not. Philip Canning had sat out the performance, at the edge of the stalls, beneath John Henry's box. He had seen a fragment of John Henry, an occasional hand and arm of Little David, but nothing else. The moment the play was over he went in search of the box in question, and the moment he knocked on the door, John Henry, with a sudden protective motion, drew Little David into his arms and hid him under his coat. He did this because, not knowing who the intruder might be, he had no wish to let that person see Little David's face. The latter young gentleman shook, and quivered, and quivered again at the sound of Philip Canning's voice, but he remained where he had been placed. Possibly he had no rooted objection to being there.

Philip Canning, perceiving with some slight astonishment the lower portion of Little David's anatomy, was about to make a further apology for his intrusion, but John Henry cut him short.

"It is of no account," said John Henry. "My little brother is affected by the success of my play. A boy does not like to show emotion in public. Pay no attention to him. He is all right where he is."

John Henry said this in a grave and convincing fashion as if it were quite an ordinary thing to find a man standing in the box of a theatre with his brother half hidden under the shelter of his coat. A far less distracted person than Philip Canning would have

been lured into a disregard of the oddness of the situation by his air of assurance.

"I have not forgotten what you told me this afternoon," continued John Henry, and he seemed to hold the hidden quantity under his coat in an even closer grasp, "but I have not had an opportunity to look for your daughter as yet. Believe me," said John Henry with great earnestness, "that it will be the first charge on my time and energy. I shall leave no stone unturned that might lead her back to you. I hope that I know where she is, and, if I am correct in my views, then she is in a safe place"—Little David shook tremendously at this point—"where she must remain for a space. Leave the matter to me, Mr. Canning, if you can trust me so far. It would be cruel to tell you that I am assured in my views when they are only suppositions. When I have any certain information to give, then I shall send for you without delay."

There was real emotion visible on Philip Canning's face, and real emotion had quivered in his voice. John Henry was acutely conscious of this, but he did not forget about Little David, also—oddly enough—he knew what he intended to do, and was quite assured of the correctness of his judgment.

"You must allow me to try and unravel this sad affair in my own fashion," he said. "I have no ulterior desire in so doing. I am assured that I shall succeed."

Philip Canning took a first and a very great step towards a reconciliation with his daughter, and he was quite unaware of the fact.

"I shall do just as you please," he said humbly. "I shall leave everything to you and wait confident that you will do your best. I am at the Paddington Hotel, and will come at once if you send for me," and having said this he turned on his heel and left the box.

"That poor man has lost his daughter," said John Henry in a very soft voice. "I want you to help me to find her, Little David.

He has suffered a lot—a great deal more than he has ever felt or suffered in all the rest of his life. She used to live with him and he was too busy with other things to see that she was there. Now she has gone and he has had time to think that of all his possessions she is the only one he desires, the only one worth possessing. You must try with me to find this girl and make him happy. Will you?”

“I—I don’t know,” said Little David in a whisper, and he shook exceedingly and seemed to be undergoing a process that shrivelled him up to a fraction of his normal size.

At this moment there came a fresh interruption. The door of the box opened for the second time and a bearded, kindly face looked in. It was a strange face to John Henry, and he was naturally indignant, but a quality of genuine kindness about it restrained him from demanding the reason of the intrusion. The face—nothing else but a hand was visible during the entire interview—cast a comprehensive glance at John Henry, at the hidden bulk which represented the top of Little David, at the lower extremities of that young gentleman which were visible, and then it spoke.

“I come from a village near Tipping Horley,” said the face, “and I knew that the man who sent a ticket to that poor sick boy for a performance in which he was interested but could not possibly attend, would not object to my looking in for a moment. I have heard all about you from him. He has odd ideas, poor lad, but if some of them are true, then I might be able to help you. This is my card.”

A hand came into the box directly below the face and tendered a card, which John Henry accepted mechanically, and then the face vanished and the door closed. John Henry glanced at the printed name and he gasped.

“Who was that?” asked Little David in alarm.

John Henry did not have an opportunity of replying.

There was a thunderous summons at the door of the box. Then

the voice of young George came in stentorian tones, demanding if they were going to keep Sheila and George Cornwall waiting all night at the entrance to the theatre. George went on to state that he was hungry and in need of his supper, and he reminded John Henry that he and Little David were motoring home with them to the Red House. Having said this George departed with the final piece of information that the car would be starting in a few moments whether they came or stayed away.

"We must go down, Little David," said John Henry.

"I—I cannot!" said Little David, and his hands closed suddenly on John Henry's waistcoat. "How can I face them like this—now?"

"They are all friends," said John Henry, "and they have all seen you before. There is no reason why you should be frightened of facing them now."

Little David shrunk to a size that seemed microscopic, and his voice was so exceedingly small that it could scarcely be heard.

"I am not afraid of facing them," he said, "but how can I face——"

"Yes!" said John Henry encouragingly, as the voice shook and ceased.

"You!" said Little David in the smallest of whispers.

"Oh, that!" said John Henry, and he acted with sudden despatch. "There is nothing to be alarmed at about me! An absurd idea!"

Little David's long blue rainproof coat hung on a hook at the side of the door. As John Henry spoke, he seized this with one hand, swung Little David out of his place of concealment with the other, stood behind the boy, and held the coat up for him to slip into. Little David slipped into it. The coat was ample and came well below the knees.

"In that," said John Henry argumentatively, "you might face the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the Lord Mayor's Coachman, not to speak of myself and the Cornwalls."

At this point most of the lights in the theatre went out.

"Come along," said John Henry, and he held out his hand.

Little David's fingers, all ten of them, closed on that hand. It would, without doubt, be difficult to descend in the darkened theatre.

"There is no reason why Little David should be afraid to face me," said John Henry, as they passed cautiously down a long, downward inclining passage. "I might be afraid to face him but I am not, for he is going to help me to find Philip Canning's daughter."

Little David made a curious statement.

He said: "Little David never had and never will have a father."

"All the more reason why he should help me to find this missing child for Philip Canning," said John Henry. "Since Little David knows what it is not to have a father, he can imagine what it must feel like to have had a child and lost her."

Little David uttered a gasping sound, and then made a second, and even more curious statement.

He said in a quivering voice: "How can I help you to look for the daughter of a man who has treated you abominably?"

John Henry paused in amazement.

"Treated me abominably!" he said. "Treated me—why even if he had, has he not thrown you into my path! I have to thank him for everything! Anyway, he has not treated me abominably."

In the dark Little David's fingers closed more tightly on John Henry's hand.

"That agreement," he commenced, and then his voice trailed into silence. Possibly he found it difficult, even in the dark, to comment on the rest of John Henry's remark.

"Bother the agreement," said John Henry. "The man is in trouble, so that finishes the matter. You must help me, Little David, for his sake, for your own, and for mine. I want to be happy, and how can I be that unless you are all happy also!"

"He accused me of the most horrible things," said Little David,

"and all I was trying to do was to get him to love me—a little. I could not face him again. I could not tell him about Little David for he would not understand. I would do anything you asked, but Mabel Canning can never go back to her father."

"Are you quite sure of that?" asked John Henry.

"Quite," said Little David with determination.

"Then you must stay with the Cornwalls for a time," said John Henry with decision. "You will understand why it is necessary later on."

"I—I will if you want me to," said Little David, but the prospect did not seem to please him greatly.

"You must do so," said John Henry. "Do you remember how you trusted me implicitly when we first met?"

Little David made no reply, but his grasp on John Henry's hand, which had loosened a trifle, again became firm.

"You must trust me in the same fashion," said John Henry. "You must believe that I am acting for the happiness of all concerned, as indeed every one tries to do, although your happiness comes first of all in my mind. It does. Will you trust me implicitly, Little David?"

Little David achieved a statement in the smallest of voices imaginable.

"I will do anything you ask," he said, "so long as it does not entail never seeing you again. I could not bear that for—for many reasons."

John Henry had a moment of temporary lunacy.

"It is very dark here," he said, "and there is no one about. Would you object very much if I—if I touched you, Little David?"

It appeared that Little David had no active objection.

"From the very first you have been in my heart," said John Henry, after a few seconds, "only I did not understand the manner of it till last night. Then I did. Now I do not believe it can be true. Do you really care for me, Little David?"

"I belong to you and to no one else," said Little David with

extraordinary passion. "I care—oh! There is some one coming towards us!"

There was. There were, to be exact, for young George appeared round the corner and he was accompanied by one of the theatre people who carried an electric torch.

"We have been detained," said John Henry with dignity, "by a train of remarkable circumstances quite impossible to explain, but we are coming now, at once."

As George Cornwall remarked to Muggie when they had reached the Red House, it was quite impossible to say what John Henry would do next. This remark was occasioned by two facts. The one was that John Henry has insisted on paying a call at his own home before starting on the journey to Litshot. The other was that he had sat next to Sheila during the said journey, and all his attentions were confined to her. He took no notice of Little David other than to see that the young gentleman was settled in comfort,

CHAPTER XX

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF JOHN HENRY MILLMAN

THE Red House had been in a state of confusion all day. John Henry's sudden appearance there, his words, and his equally sudden departure had not tended to lessen this distressing state of affairs. Muggie, having seen Sheila, George Cornwall, and young George start off for Town in the car to attend the dress rehearsal of John Henry's play, felt the necessity of composing her feelings before she attacked the preparation of the feast arranged, long before, to mark the termination of John Henry's theatrical complications.

"If any one calls to see me, I am in Town," she remarked to the little maid of all work, "but do not forget to waken me at six o'clock."

Having issued these instructions she retired to her room, but she was not left there in peace. She had scarcely composed herself to sleep when a timid scratching sounded at the door, and the voice of the little maid was heard speaking in apologetic tones.

"There is a man with two eyes at the door who says he must have a word with you, ma'am!"

Muggie groaned, but her sense of humour was tickled, also her curiosity was aroused.

"A man with two eyes!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean? Most men have two eyes."

"Not like this one," said the little maid with assurance. "I've seen him before. He comes from Tipping Horley."

"Show him and his eyes into the sitting-room," said Muggie in a voice of resignation. "I shall be down in a few moments."

On descending she found the gentleman with two eyes seated on the extreme edge of a chair in a melancholy attitude of great discomfort. He rose, as she came in, and his two eyes commenced to play a game of trying to see which could look furthest away from her face. Muggie was a placid soul, but she was genuinely startled. She stood and grasped the door in the manner of one prepared for immediate flight.

"What do you want?" she gasped.

"You! or boots! or anything they fancy!" said the gentleman with the eyes, and he made a ghostly pass with his hand as if indicating himself.

Muggie became afflicted with nerves.

"No one wears boots in this house," she said. "We have none, nor shoes either."

The face of the odd man became illuminated with a joyous expression, and he regarded Muggie with profound admiration and respect.

"There are some that seem to wear nothing else, to judge by the way they hanker after them," he said, "but no matter." He tapped himself on the chest. "Odd man from the Black Bull at Tipping Horley," he said. "Mrs. Bluebell, likewise Fammy, has had a second visit from Mr. Canning, and she wanted you to know, for she advised him to see Mr. John Henry in London."

Muggie came into the room and sat down.

"Tell me about it," she commanded, and she waved the odd man back into his chair.

The odd man, seating himself, opened his mouth, but he was prevented from speaking by a knock on the door.

The head of the little maid protruded into the room, and her expression was both startled and warlike.

"I'm very sorry I'm sure, m'am," she said, "but *will* you see it?"

She partially opened the door, but remained in the attitude of one strictly on the defensive. It was almost as if there were a chimpanzee, or some similar and disturbing creature, outside.

Muggie and the odd man looked at each other in astonishment.

"What is it?" asked Muggie with growing curiosity.

"The wild woman come back," said the little maid. "Her that smashed up the furniture and ruined my hair."

"Oh, Veronica!" said Muggie, greatly relieved. "Show her in at once."

Veronica's lop-sided figure advanced slowly into the room.

"I come down to see you," she said to the odd man, "and they told me you were here. I've got a message for you from Mr. John."

"Sit down, Veronica," said Muggie, "and make yourself at home. You are just in time. This gentleman was going to tell me about Mabel Canning's father. Mrs. Bluebell has advised him to call at your house."

Veronica remained standing.

"So—that is how he came," she said. "I understand. He called and Mr. John was out. He will not call again. I saw to that."

Muggie became vastly curious.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Veronica shortly, "except that Little David was scared at the sound of his voice, and Mr. John woke up when he came home and I told him the boy had disappeared. Spent the whole night out of bed, he did. He knows all about it now, and very happy he is, too, seeing that Miss Sheila is in love with him."

Muggie raised her hands in agonized protest and the odd man stiffened in his chair.

"But she is not," gasped Muggie. "She is not in love with him. It is all nonsense."

"Perhaps so," said Veronica, "but is it not me that is going to tell him that?"

It did not appear to be the odd man, or Muggie either, for that matter.

"But now when he knows about Little David!" exclaimed Muggie in tones of anguish.

"Precisely," said Veronica, nodding her head, "he has thought about all that. He said, once he was married, there would be no reason why Little David should not stay on with him for ever. He also said that he would like to be married at once."

Muggie arose and commenced to adjust the various ornaments in the room. She felt the necessity of doing something to keep her mind occupied. Behind her back Veronica telegraphed an expressive glance at the odd man, signalling the fact that she wished them both to depart at once. Muggie paused by the window, and gave voice to a sudden decision.

"They are all coming down here to supper," she said. "Thank goodness I have the place to prepare and that will keep me busy. I am not going to think because I cannot. It is all too absurd. There must be some way out of the difficulty and it will turn up. Will you have a cup of tea, Veronica?"

Veronica shook her head.

"I got my living to earn," she said. "I must be back in Town to-night, and I must give the odd man Mr. John's message."

Muggie regarded Veronica with attention.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have come all this distance to give a message to the odd man?"

"I have," said Veronica, "and why not! He asked me to do it!"

"He asked her to do it," repeated Muggie in a muted voice of exasperation, "so she came at once, without question! Might I ask what this wonderful message may be?"

"Certainly," said Veronica. "I shall give it to him now, and then you will hear." She turned to the odd man. "Mr. John said," she remarked, speaking with great distinctness, "that if you did not do it at once, he would have to come down and do it for you. He said also that he saw no reason why they should not all happen at the same time. He wants you to make quite

certain on the subject before to-morrow, when he will come in to see you himself."

The effect of these words was peculiar and impressive. Muggie—she was dusting a small vase at the time—opened her mouth to make some forcible remark, but her mouth remained open and motionless. The odd man, rising from his chair with the sudden energy of one who has been pricked in the leg, retreated into a corner where he stood with his back to the wall, an expression of fear and horror on his face, and his hands moving in weird gestures, apparently repelling some unseen and much dreaded foe. The really peculiar part of it was that, although he appeared to be scared to the borders of terror, he also appeared to derive some satisfaction from the process. Veronica, watching him with a critical eye, snorted with disdain.

"Of all the helpless creatures on the earth," she remarked, "give me a man. Men"—Veronica grasped the air in an attempt to convey the profundity of her contempt—"are just men. What do you mean by it, you great baby?"

The odd man, without explaining what he meant by it, continued to do it with increased application, while his eyes performed perfect miracles of rapid motion. His face, also, grew a dull brick-red colour, but that was no doubt due to the violence of his exercises.

"What is the matter with the man?" asked Muggie in real alarm. "He looks as if he were about to have a fit!"

Veronica regarded her darkly.

"There is something in him that has been there for a long time and has got to come out," she said grimly.

"Mercy on us, shall I call a doctor?" asked Muggie.

Veronica snorted.

"Mr. John is the only doctor he requires," she said, "and he will have him, too, if he is not careful." She turned to the odd man. "Now, will you promise to do it?" she demanded.

Muggie's heart melted at the sight of the odd man's very genuine distress.

"What is the trouble, my poor man?" she asked. "Can I do anything for you?"

The odd man spoke in a voice of agony.

He said: "A new one, or a bottle of poison! Some people would hit a man over the head with a broom, and I could not stand that. A man wants to keep what he thinks he has. No loss is some gain, and the least said the better for all."

"A new what?" demanded Muggie with curiosity.

"Face!" said the odd man in a voice of profound and bottomless gloom.

Veronica suddenly moved to the door and opened it. She stood there and beckoned the odd man in a fierce and determined fashion.

"There are some that require to be drove," she remarked. "You come with me and do it now. You got to do it, for Mr. John says so, and he knows more about it than most people. Come along with you!"

The odd man backed against the wall in a fruitless attempt to retire further from Veronica. A change came over his face. He seemed to be more afraid, but there was a quality of indignation in his fear.

"A man might want to do a thing and yet not do it," he said defensively. "He might even manage to do it, but not before a crowd."

Veronica beckoned with an inexorable finger.

"No fear of crowds," she said. "I want to see you go in at the door, and I want to see your face looking out of the door ten minutes after, and I want to tell you something that will make the matter simpler. You come away now with no more argument! I can hear that bus on the road, and we had best get inside."

The odd man went. Muggie followed the quaint pair to the door and watched them waiting for the bus. The little maid of

all work came and stood beside her, and she also watched. Veronica appeared to be talking earnestly, and the odd man appeared to be listening with an attention that engulfed his own personal fears and discomforts. The groaning and panting of the bus came steadily nearer.

"I wonder!" said Muggie, and she said no more.

"I see they have left the gate open," said the little maid artlessly. "I had best go and shut it, m'am, for fear of them tramps!"

Muggie made no reply and the little maid departed. It is interesting to note, however, that there must have been a peculiarity about that gate. The little maid went out into the road. Possibly the gate could not be shut unless this procedure was first of all enacted. Presently the bus came slowly along and the quaint pair clambered inside.

"Eavesdropping," said Muggie sternly, as the little maid returned, "is a thing I abominate—what was she talking about?"

The little maid was agog with excitement. She lived partly in a world of dusting, scrubbing, and cleaning, and partly in a realm created by the reading of novels that cost twopence and have a relation to reality that is somewhat peculiar. Her outlook on life benefited in consequence.

"It's murder," she said, "and they have gone to hide the bodies."

She had, by the way, been listening at the sitting-room door, and although her view through the key-hole had been limited, it had borne directly on the figure of the odd man.

Muggie, while quite incredulous, was sufficiently curious to demand an exact repetition of Veronica's words.

"I didn't rightly hear anything except one sentence owing to the noise of the bus," said the little maid, "but I heard that all right."

"Well!" demanded Muggie. "What was it?"

"They will both disappear for good and all and no one will be

the wiser,' ” repeated the little maid in an ecstasy. “That is what she said, and if you had seen how pleased he was you would know that it must be murder. My! I am excited!”

“You come and grow excited over cleaning out the dining-room,” said Muggie sternly, but she was unable to fathom the meaning of Veronica’s words.

“I wonder where they went to,” she muttered, pausing in the mixing of a pudding. “I wish I had eyes like—like the insect that can look round corners”—Muggie, in her extreme youth, had been in love, at one and the same time, with two gentlemen—one scientific and the other imaginative, and had culled therefrom stray fragments of knowledge both true and fanciful—“then I could stand here and watch them!”

Since she had not, she went on with her task. It was a thousand pities, however, that she had not eyes of this accommodating nature if only for a few seconds. The sight she would have seen was one calculated to please anybody with the generous nature of Muggie, or even with one less generous.

The odd man, with every outward appearance of a criminal about to be condemned, stood in Fammy’s kitchen. That good soul, after a swift glance at his face, had commenced to make preparations for tea on a somewhat gigantic scale for two people. She laid the cloth, cut the bread and butter, produced the cake, placed the kettle—it was just boiling, Fammy’s kettle was always on the point of boiling—ready on the hob, and having done all these things and again glanced at the odd man, who remained in the same position, she fell to cutting more bread and butter, and still more, till the loaf was in danger of being completely demolished.

“That is the best news I have heard for many a long day,” she remarked, “and I believe Veronica is right. It will work out for the best,” and she went on with her task with a heightened colour.

The odd man watched her, and when she had reached the last fragment of bread—it was the thinnest of crusts and not deserving of the care bestowed on it—he spoke, and his voice shook a trifle as if it were not quite under his control.

“A man is as he was made—on the outside, but he can try to make himself better inside. I’ve been trying ever since I came here, ever since he spoke to me in the inn yonder. A man gets hard, and bitter, and sour, when everybody spits at him, and calls him names, and laughs because he is queer to look at. I’ve been searching for one thing for a long time and never thought to find it. I’ve been dreaming that I might find it now, but it is only a dream.”

“What have you been looking for?” asked Fammy, and she commenced to spread more butter on that last piece of bread.

“Happiness,” said the odd man, in an uneven tone of voice. “I wondered if you would give me a hand to find it.”

Fammy, who disliked half measures, gave him both; and at that moment the long-suffering kettle boiled over with a cheerful bubbling and a wild gush of steam.

“My clean hearth!” exclaimed the practical Fammy in horror, but the horror was slight and she left the kettle to itself. “Gracious!” she ejaculated, a second later, half laughing and half crying. “The man must be mad!”

The odd man had lifted the offending kettle, and not contented with placing it in a position of safety, carried it bodily out of the kitchen, out of the house, and into the garden. There, having first of all waved it to Veronica who stood by the bend of the road, he placed it on a flat stone, and returned precipitately into the kitchen.

“I have placed it on a stone to cool,” he remarked to Fammy.

As Fammy said when they were in a fitting state to think about tea, he had better go and sit on the flat stone himself, while she made everything ready. If he remained where he was she might find herself pouring the hot water on the bread again, or putting

jam in the cups in place of sugar. In view of their somewhat excited state this appeared to be a reasonable proposition.

Veronica, having witnessed the waving of the kettle, stood for a long time by the bend of the road, and her sallow unlovely face grew very sad, and very odd to look at. She watched the cottage and she sighed, and presently there came to her ears the sound of a bus travelling towards Tipping Horley. The sound carried no meaning to her mind for her thoughts were roaming far afield; but when the bus hove in sight she shook herself after the fashion of a wet dog.

"Not for the likes of me," she said. "Fancy the fear of bringing a creature like myself into the world! You got to find all that in his happiness and hers."

She stopped the bus, and climbed on, and her face worked so oddly that the conductor was half minded to bar her progress on the suspicion that she was mad. Veronica, who had a tongue, rapidly disillusioned him on this point. She did this so thoroughly that the man was diffident of following her up to the top to collect her fare. When he did, Veronica spoke to him.

"What would you say if I were to ask you to marry me?" she demanded.

The conductor, with some reason, almost fell backwards down the stairs.

Veronica laughed.

"I got a sense of humour in spite of my face," she remarked. "I want a ticket for all the way."

She reached the abode of Mrs. Baldwin just as John Henry was handing Little David into the cab that took them to the theatre.

"I've seen the odd man," she remarked. "You do not require to worry about him any more. He has found what you have brought him."

John Henry's direct reply to this was wordless, and the taxi-driver, who had not suspected that Veronica and he were intimately acquainted, was astounded into almost swallowing his cigarette.

Both he and the conductor of the country bus had something to say to their respective wives when their daily tasks were over.

The bus-conductor said: "I wonder, supposing your face had been blown to bits the day before the wedding, if I would have married you!"

His wife who was pretty, and blessed with no imagination, immediately accused him of being drunk.

The taxi-driver said: "I seen some strange sights in my day, but you could have knocked me over with a feather. Ugly ain't the word, and he hugged her as if she had been the Queen of Sheba. Then he said that everything was arranged for her to start off at night whenever he tipped her the wink. Disgraceful, I call it!"

His wife who was a tired, worn-out creature of many regrets and some few sorrows, sighed and looked wistfully at her owner and possessor. She seemed to be glad at the thought of some one, no matter who or what, being in receipt of a hug. She, poor soul, had parted company with such things many years before.

John Henry possessed the instinctive faculty of making people think. It was not his fault. He just had it, as he had eyes, a nose, and teeth. No one can blame him.

Muggie did quite a lot of thinking. She was still hard at the task when the sound of the car at the door apprised her of the arrival of her guests. The sight of John Henry's radiant face, of Little David lost, apparently, in a dream, of Sheila and George Cornwall gloomily apprehensive, scattered her thoughts, which had commenced to become orderly and decent, and reduced her mind to a state of chaos. In this condition the sight of young George, sedate, normal, and full of youthful vigour, appealed to her immensely. She turned to him as a child might turn to its parent, insinuated him into a dark corner in the hall, and demanded enlightenment on what was going to happen in the matter of Sheila and John Henry.

George appeared to be astonished.

"Why!" he said. "They are both going to be married. What could happen to them? Any one can see that John Henry is happy."

Muggie, making no verbal reply, walked away holding her head in her hands. At the foot of the stairs she encountered Sheila and, although she was genuinely sorry for the disconsolate appearance of that young woman, her voice was fierce.

"You have got to put a stop to all this nonsense," she said. "If you do not speak to John Henry before the night is out, your father and I will do so. I refuse to be made a raving lunatic through worry before my time."

Sheila's reply to this was to burst into tears, and at that George Cornwall and John Henry appeared at the top of the stairs; Little David emerged from the sitting-room; and young George, to whom the sight of Sheila weeping was more than he could stand, sprang forward and took her in his arms. Sheila wept in comparative comfort, as one might say, but she wept bitterly for all that. The sound of her sobs drove George Cornwall down the stairs at a pace quite inconsistent with his years and corporeal development. The sound also drove all doubt and chaos from the mind of Muggie.

The two elder members of the Cornwall family, advancing like the wings of an army, sought to detach and comfort the weeping girl. She, oddly enough, refused to be detached. In fact she clung to young George with remarkable persistence. The two advancing wings fell back and regarded each other in astonishment and dismay. At this point Sheila spoke.

"I—I would not feel it so much," she said, "but you have been so horrid. You do not seem to care at all, and you know what I promised when we commenced this wretched business."

Sheila was undoubtedly speaking to young George, and he as undoubtedly replied to her, and, also as undoubtedly, they had forgotton about the elder members of the Cornwall family, John Henry, Little David, and everybody but themselves.

John Henry, who had been watching the scene from the bend of the stairs, descended as young George commenced to reply in a whisper audible only to Sheila. The elder members of the Cornwall family, with a total lack of logic, turned on him and simultaneously uttered the same remark.

"This is all your fault," they said in indignant chorus.

"I am sure I hope it is," said John Henry simply.

Sheila created a diversion. She suddenly stopped weeping, wrenched herself free from young George, and, advancing to the side of John Henry at a single bound, flung her arms round his neck and kissed him on both cheeks one after the other. Having done this she as suddenly swerved upon Little David, and caught him by the shoulders as if about to shake him with violence. Whether it was the way in which that young gentleman looked at her, or whether it was because he shrank and shrivelled within his overcoat, is impossible to tell; but, if her original intention was to shake, it was not carried out. For some inexplicable reason the two young things, after regarding each other for a few seconds, embraced and kissed with fervency.

"I was angry with you at one time," said Little David to Sheila, "but I do not think I could be angry with any one to-night, least of all with you, my one girl friend."

"I was annoyed at your going about like that," said Sheila to Little David, "and you were a pig not to take me into your confidence, but you can go on in the same clothes for the rest of your life. It will make no difference to me. We have always understood each other."

George Cornwall gave undoubted signs of embarking on the procedure known as "putting his foot down."

"What is the meaning of all this?" he demanded, and he was about to say a great deal more when Sheila turned her attention to him.

"It means that John Henry and I are both going to be married," she said, "but not to each other."

"Indeed, and pray to whom are you to be married?" demanded George Cornwall, eluding her grasp.

Sheila, succeeding in catching hold of him, hid a very red face on his shoulder.

"Ask John Henry," she said in a muffled voice.

"When I saw these two beautiful young creatures on Tipping Horley platform," said John Henry, "I saw, at once, that they were made, cut out for each other. When I found out that they were aware of the fact I was overjoyed, and when I learnt that you two good people refused to believe it, I determined to make it quite plain to you. I might not have interfered, you know, but George, poor boy, has a reason for not pressing his suit. A reason," repeated John Henry looking at George Cornwall and Muggie, "that exists only in his own imagination. I expected this to happen to-night, but not quite so soon. I had calculated on the effect of my speech at supper about Sheila's marriage to myself."

At this point Little David gave a startled gasp, and Sheila, looking up in alarm, addressed a remark to him.

"I have quite a lot to tell you to-night, dear," she said.

"Oh indeed!" said Little David with reserve.

There was a moment of silence during which Sheila looked abashed, Little David indignant, John Henry dignified, the two elder members of the Cornwall family bewildered, the little maid of all work—she was watching the scene from behind the kitchen door with goggling eyes—like an image of curiosity, and then young George commenced to laugh. He did so at first in a nervous and constrained fashion, but presently, throwing back his head, he roared in a full, throaty, and whole-hearted manner that was exceedingly contagious. George Cornwall looked at Muggie and attempted to frown, but the corners of his mouth twitched. Muggie looked at him and the tears came to her eyes, but the corners of her mouth twitched also. They advanced to meet each other, moved, it seemed, by a common impulse. They met and clasped

hands, and then they stood together and commenced to smile—rather a tremulous smile at first, for they both felt old and rather forlorn.

George went on roaring with back-flung head.

John Henry, casting off his air of dignity as if it had been a garment, took a species of large step, or bound, or stride, you may call it what you please, and reaching the side of Little David by this means, encircled that young man with one arm in a protective and rather engaging fashion. Little David, thus taken charge of, was seen to quiver a little. He grew red, then white, then his lips trembled and his hands took a firm grasp on John Henry's coat. He hid his face from sight for moments on end, and when he looked up again there was a decided smile about the corners of his mouth, which looked anything but a straight, determined line.

All this happened in so many minutes and still George went on roaring with back-flung head and open mouth, only now his laugh had taken such possession of him that his eyes were closed, and he twisted himself into strange contortions. Sheila, perceiving this, lost her abashed and chastened air. She appeared to be struck with an idea, and this idea nearly swept the little maid of all work under the kitchen table, for it carried Sheila into that room with great suddenness. She re-appeared, in a second, with something in her hand, crept up to the unconscious and swaying George, and, taking aim with great and commendable caution, slipped the kitchen soap into his mouth.

George stopped laughing on a stifled gasp, but that did not matter for then the others began. They went on as George pursued Sheila round and round the hall, and neither George Cornwall nor Muggie made any objections to what George did to that young woman when he caught her. As the laughter was about to subside, the little maid of all work suddenly emerged from the kitchen, where she had been bottling up her mirth, and sitting down on the last step of the stairs, flung her apron over her head and com-

menced a shrill solo on her own. She looked so odd, and she had gathered so many strange substances on her dress, arms, and face, when Sheila had swept her into the kitchen, that they all commenced to laugh afresh, at her, and with her.

You never heard such a din, or saw such an odd sight in all your life, and on the wings of this laughter many things passed silently away that were best forgotten. Innocent mirth is a wonderful healer, a magic balsam that smooths over sore places and leaves a refreshing sense of well-being in its train. George Cornwall and Muggie quite forgot that they ever had held any objection to a possible marriage between Sheila and George. Sheila forgot all about her period of trial and confused suffering when she had imagined herself engaged to John Henry. Little David commenced to believe that there never had been anything in his life to make for any element other than happiness. As for John Henry, he did not laugh much, but his face was very happy, very happy and very full of thought. You might have sworn—if happiness were a concrete thing that could be faced and seen in relation to others—that John Henry was looking at happiness and thanking it for being there.

They might all be laughing to this very day, for the antics of the little maid on the stairs were exceedingly funny, but the sound of a car throbbing up to the door dried up the general mirth, at once, with sudden completeness. The entire Cornwall family, including the little maid, looked at one another with amazed apprehension. Little David, in a sudden panic, clung to John Henry. John Henry looked towards the door and he did not seem to be one whit astonished.

There was a knock. There were a succession of knocks, and no one ventured to open the door. The hour, it must be remembered, was late. It was after midnight.

The door opened a trifle and Veronica's sallow face peeped in. It disappeared immediately and then the door opened wide, and a small procession entered. Veronica's lop-sided figure came

first, very much to one side indeed, for she led some one by the hand who seemed unwilling, yet eager, to enter. It was Philip Canning. Behind them, from the gloom, emerged the figures of Fammy and the odd man. They stood just inside the doorway, hand in hand, and the driver of the car peered over their shoulders in obvious curiosity.

George Cornwall was so astonished that he sat down plump on a chair—it was fortunate that one stood behind him or he would have gone down to the floor—and gasped, and stared, evidently doubting the testimony of his senses. Little David gasped and clung to John Henry. The others were petrified into silence and immovability except the little maid of all work, who, recognising the odd man and Veronica, was heard to mutter with great satisfaction: “Now for them murdered bodies!”

Veronica drew Philip Canning into the middle of the hall, directly under the gas-jet, and there she left him with the air of one who has carried her labours to a satisfactory conclusion.

The sudden change from the darkness to the brilliant light of the hall was, no doubt, responsible for a part of Philip Canning’s appearance of helplessness. The oddness of his entry, his strange companions, and the sight of the astonished Cornwall staring at him, did not tend to lessen it. He looked, what he was, a man well on in life who had lived for years in the bondage of his own pride and reserve, and who had stepped out and beyond these things into an understanding of the facts that matter in life. He looked, in fact, as John Henry had imagined and hoped that he would. He was very sad, very weary, very hopeless, and exceedingly pathetic. He stood, for a moment, immovable, then he made a curious, helpless motion with his hands and turned to John Henry.

“I have done as you asked,” he said. “I have come here with these people without question. What have you to tell me?”

It was not necessary for John Henry to say anything.

Little David, abandoning his hold on John Henry’s coat, tearing

off that strange contraption which reduced the unruliness of his hair and made his head appear as the head of one that is male, rushed to the bowed figure under the light and threw himself upon his breast.

"Father!" sobbed Little David, "forgive me! I was lonely and used to dress up as a boy. I was angry because you suspected me unjustly and so I went away. I have always tried to get you to love me, and I shall try again hard. Only say that you forgive me, and do not look so sad. I have done nothing to be ashamed of. I assure you I have not."

Philip Canning's arms closed on the palpitating figure which he strained to his heart.

"If you had done all the evil things on earth, you would still be my child," he said, and his voice shook. "I have nothing to forgive. It is your forgiveness that I must beg for."

If you have any conception of what a merry supper-party it was that took place that night in the small dining-room of the Red House, if you have the remotest idea of how cramped they were for space, if you have the slightest idea of the strange actions perpetrated by the little maid of all work in the process of serving the same, if you have even a fragment of an idea of the satisfaction on all their faces, then you have some conception of how wonderful happiness really and truly can be. When the mirth, and the merriment, and the laughter, and the satisfaction of all were at their height, John Henry suddenly rose with his glass in his hand.

"We must not forget the poor sick boy," he said. "Let us drink to his complete recovery. It will please him to hear that we thought of him in the midst of all this."

As Sheila remarked to Little David, when they were going to bed, it was just like John Henry. Perhaps it was. He cannot be blamed for it. He was made that way.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH LITTLE DAVID BECOMES LOST FOR EVER

OF all the good days in the week—Sunday. Of all the good hours in that day of rest—noon. Of all the bright days in the year when the sun shines to chase away gloom, perhaps one of the sunniest, and brightest, and most cheerful that ever has been. Of all the good spots to be in on such a day, at such an hour—a small country church, plain, unostentatious, set in a humble little garden where the flowers are simple crosses, unpretentious grave-stones, sincere testimonies—for when the purse is small a grave-stone is a testimony—to the virtues of mankind. Of all the poor livings in the gift of the church, perhaps one of the poorest. Of all the frugal, earnest, humble priests, perhaps one of the simplest and humblest—a man who entered the church, not through the doorway of the universities, but through the door of faith, and the charity and help of others. You must bear with me for a few seconds and deign to enter this humble place of worship.

There is a marriage taking place inside. There are, to be exact, three marriages taking place at one and the same time. If you examine the group at the altar you will see none but familiar faces. I am unwilling to look at them. It is a pain to me, and also a pleasure, for to them I must soon say good-bye. It is always so in life—the meeting, the short time together, and then the parting.

That young man who holds himself so proudly is John Henry Millman. The vision in white which stands so close to him, yes, that was once Little David, but he is now in process of being lost for ever. Perhaps that is why the voice of the white vision is so

low and tremulous when speech is necessary. I do not know. There are many things I do not know. That other young man, who also holds himself with pride and is so carefully dressed, yes, that is young George; and beside him, a perfect picture of enchanting beauty, stands Sheila, very soon to be Sheila Cornwall no longer. A little further along, completing the half circle before the surpliced clergyman with the simple, earnest face—you will recognise that face, for it once looked into John Henry's box at the theatre, and is, in fact, closely related to the sick boy—stands an odd couple. You know them both. You could not mistake those roaming eyes even though the owner of the same is disguised in a new suit of clothes, and his olden melancholy has totally vanished. It is the odd man, and beside him, in all the glory of her buxom personality, stands Fammy—a Fammy transfigured by innumerable ribbons, and laces, and by the goodness of her own heart shining out in her face.

You know all these and you know the others also. They are all near by, standing in ones or twos, in an irresponsible and curious fashion, for this is no ordinary wedding. There is no attempt at form or ceremony. It is just the simple giving of so many female hearts into the keeping of so many pairs of male hands. It is bound to be an odd ceremony, for John Henry has made all the arrangements by himself. From the time when there was a midnight supper-party at the Red House, he has been busy, carrying out his designs, with no argument or hindrance from anybody.

There are a few people in the body of the church, but never mind them. They are merely there. They have come in to look on, like myself, and do not count. You must confine your attention to the group by the altar. Philip Canning is there, yes, that is the senior partner of Canning and Canning although you may have to look several times at him to make sure that it is not some simple, happy man with a chance resemblance to that once great and awe-inspiring personality. Ralph Seymour and

Sinclair Dodds stand together, a little apart, and to the right. You would never mistake them although they also seem to be changed—happier and easier in their relationship to life, perhaps. Veronica—you cannot mistake Veronica, even though she may be hidden in clothes of an astonishing smartness, for her face is working in the old, odd way that it used to work under the influence of any strong emotion—stands alone; and she holds herself proudly, for is she not in sole charge of a certain small house, tastefully, artistically, and newly furnished from top to bottom! Veronica is exceedingly proud, and also exceedingly happy. She looks forward to seeing—oh, to seeing many things that will fill up certain waste places in her own life. The two goggling eyes directly behind her belong to the little maid of all work from the Red House; and the two middle-aged people, who stand close together as if facing some prospect of loneliness, you will easily recognise as George Cornwall and Muggie. You could make no mistake in that direction for their four eyes are glistening in an odd and unaccountable fashion. Where you might make a mistake is in the seated figure beside the old man. You will recognise the old man, at once, as the ancient porter from Tipping Horley station, but you will have to look twice at the figure on the chair. He is not strong enough to bear the strain of standing, poor boy, but he is strong enough to be on the direct road to health and a complete recovery.

John Henry says that the sick boy is better through the bounty of Philip Canning, but the sick boy holds other views. Perhaps both of them are correct to some extent. It is hard to tell. Anyway, there he is, and you can judge from his face whether he is pleased to be present or not.

I will not keep you waiting for it is soon over, this simple ceremony, and there is no necessity to say anything more about it. Listen, and you will hear the organ pealing, the bells ringing, and if you listen well, perhaps you may hear several happy hearts beating to a tune of joy. It is all very ordinary, and customary,

and infinitely boring, no doubt. I must ask your forgiveness for the absence of beautiful dresses, and fashionable crowds, and famous clergy, and all the other appurtenances that should grace a proper wedding. They have no part here where there is nothing but joy and happiness—small matters for me to draw your attention to; but on the very first page I stated that this was not a decent novel, or a proper work of fiction. It is only a piece of life. Let us pass on to listen to several scraps of conversation between the occupants of divers carriages on the drive from the church to the Black Bull at Tipping Horley.

“Do you remember my stating that, if Mr. Canning consulted Millman about his missing daughter, it would bind him to our firm for good?” asks Sinclair Dodds of Ralph Seymour.

“I do,” says Ralph Seymour, “and you never made a truer statement in your life. I would like to know how it all came about, for this wedding is very sudden, and odd, and quite unexpected.”

“I shall be a very lonely man,” says Philip Canning to George Cornwall and Muggie. “You must come over and see me occasionally. The distance is not great.”

“We shall,” say the two elder members of the Cornwall family, “and we expect you to come to us just whenever you please.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” says Fammy to the odd man. “Remember how old we are. You should know better!”

The odd man pays no attention to her words.

“George,” says Sheila suddenly, “if you imagine that I am going to obey you for the rest of my life, you are greatly mistaken. I shall do just what I think best, and I reserve the right to embrace John Henry whenever I feel like it.”

“As the newly-wed wife of a newly-made junior partner in a wealthy publishing firm,” says George judicially, “it might be a wise reservation. Still, I hope you may feel like embracing some one else occasionally.”

It appears that Sheila feels like that now.

"I got special instructions to see that you had the most comfortable seat, so it is no good offering it to us. Anyway we are not ladies, at least she may be, I'm not. I'm just a happy woman," says Veronica to the sick boy.

The little maid of all work, still under the influence of her twopenny novels, becomes vastly indignant for a second, but that soon passes.

"Why, we have got there already and there was something I wanted to ask you!" says the white vision to John Henry, as their carriage stops at the Black Bull.

John Henry leans out of the window and speaks to the driver.

"Drive on to the cross-roads and then come back—slowly," he says.

"I believe I love you more now than I did when I was Little David," says the white vision seriously, when the carriage has moved on, "but that was not what I was going to say."

"We are almost back again now," exclaims John Henry presently, in a surprised tone of voice. "The man must have thought I told him to hurry!"

"What made you so determined to have the wedding lunch at the Black Bull?" asks the white vision. "I have wanted to know all along, but I did not like to ask."

John Henry's face grows grave, and a far-away expression comes into his eyes.

"I want you to have unhappy memories of no place on earth where we two have been together," he says simply, "and you were very unhappy that night. I thought to-day might dispel the other from your mind."

"I never want to forget it," says the white vision, and she kisses John Henry fiercely in spite of the bronchial efforts of the coachman at the carriage door.

The Black Bull has been in a state of turmoil and excitement from the first blink of dawn. The maid-servants have all been on the verge of hysterics and recovered when no one paid any

attention to them. The new odd man—he is young and full of what the landlord calls “cheek”—has surreptitiously eaten a meal sufficient for half a dozen. The landlord and the landlady have made the one public room of the inn look a credit to the Black Bull, or any other species of bull that has ever existed. All the Tipping Horley Minstrels, in ones and twos, have been in to inspect that room, and their admiration has been unqualified.

If you look in now, you will see the company from the church seated round the long table with John Henry and his bride at the head, and young George and his bride on the right-hand side, and the odd man and his bride on the left. If you wait for a second, you will see that George Cornwall and Muggie are in animated conversation, explaining matters to Ralph Seymour and Sinclair Dodds; and you will notice that Philip Canning is listening and putting in a word every now and then. If you wait for a few seconds longer, you will perceive that the entire table is listening to their conversation. You will readily understand that John Henry is hearing it by the sudden and reserve dignity of his expression.

If you still care to linger, you will hear Ralph Seymour say in a bewildered whisper: “Mr. Canning led into your house at midnight by the—by the lady on your left! How could Millman think of such an idea?”

You will then hear the lady on George Cornwall’s left snort, rap the table with her knife, and speak in no uncertain voice.

“I begs to point out that there is no lady on Mr. Cornwall’s left, only Veronica the charity foundling, although she *is* a proper servant now. As for how Mr. John came to think of such an idea that is easy to understand. It was because he did not think of himself but only of the other people.”

As there is a certain element of fierceness about Veronica’s voice and general deportment, John Henry is entreated to make a speech. He rises to his feet. If you look at him carefully, you will see that he has a decided list to the one side. The vision in white is solely responsible for this. She is holding on to one of

his hands under cover of the table-cloth. His eyes travel all round the table from face to face and he smiles, but they rest, finally, on the sick boy seated between Muggie and the ancient porter, and then the smile fades from his eyes.

"Are you quite sure you will be none the worse for all this excitement?" he asks earnestly, and is as earnestly reassured. "Then there is no necessity for me to say a single word," he continues, and the smile has returned to his eyes. "We are all happy. I can see it quite distinctly!"

If you linger a few seconds longer, you will have no doubt that they are all happy. You will have no doubt on quite a number of other points also, such as the solemnity, pathos, and humour of even so simple an affair as this marriage lunch. You will have no doubt either that the vision in white, while being quite assured that John Henry is capable of looking after herself and any other odd person as well, is quite incapable of looking after the gentleman known as John Henry Millman. You will observe that she has taken on the task with enthusiasm. You will not fail to see this even before they are half way through lunch; but I advise you to leave the room in the moment of silence after John Henry has spoken to the sick boy.

I prefer to leave them at that point, for they were all looking at John Henry, all thinking the same thought, all quite assured that there was nothing extraordinary about his manner of doing things, for it was a manner quite of his own, and came straight from his own heart. It did. He was, you must admit, an odd creature and also a very foolish one. His folly, however, appeared to give pleasure to other people, now and then, so perhaps it was justified. I do not know. I like to believe that it was, and to imagine that you may think so also; for, to him, it was not folly, it was just—life!

THE END

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